The Bandit Zimara

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THE BANDIT ZIMARA

§ Inquiry

Gret sees that Avbury is giving a lecture in her city, and goes to the lecture and afterwards invites Avbury for a drink. It takes a minute for the Doctor to recognize in this young woman the features of the girl she knew. Avbury is delighted, and hugs her.

"I'm hungry. Let's make it dinner. And let's find some place I can smoke." The Doctor finishes taking leave of the others, and finds Gret outside with a taxi. There is just one restaurant serving Rudenyan food. It's crowded when they get there.

"How is Aloyzi?" Avbury asks, once they've settled in.

"Really good. His partner just had a baby." Great shows the picture on her comm. "He's a helicopter pilot, can you believe it?"

"I didn't know you live here."

"Some years ago I got funding for a documentary on immigrants. I liked the place. I came back and stayed."

"I saw that. Nicely done. Moving."

"Now my agency wants me to do something about my mom."

"They've published so much already. I don't even read it any more."

"You know it's not very good. Not very truthful."

Avbury has come to distrust talk of The Truth. "You're pissed off," she says.

"I am, sort of. The story people hear is full of holes. There's a lot missing, more even than I know."

"Your people, they want the Real Zimara, is that it? Something spicy, a touch of scandal."

"I don't care what they want. I have my own questions."

"And you want to know if I think it's all right to dig around."

"I don't need your permission, Grace. What I want from you is, what do you think is the most important thing? You knew Zimara before she became the public figure. What would you say about her that the heroic version does not cover?"

The waiter brings their food. Avbury thinks it over as they eat. They talk about the people they know, and what they've been doing these past many years. Avbury offers Gret a cigarette; when she declines, the Doctor lights one and leans back.

"People talk now as if the whole thing were inevitable, foreordained. Now there are lots of women doing that kind of work. But it was Zimara who saw the possibility. From very early on, I think." Gret leans forward, about to say something, but Avbury anticipates her: "Don't ask me how she got the idea."

"From you, maybe."

"No. I'm an administrator. I fix machinery when it goes awry. Zimara built something new. What does Arasely say?"

"Arasely's dead."

"I'm sorry, I hadn't heard."

Gret shrugs. "Her kids were there. I was there. We were sad to part."

"I liked her a lot."

"For a long time I didn't think about my mom. But with Arasely gone, and the years passing, it's only going to get harder to find out what happened."

"Why."

"That's right. So I need to do it now if I'm going to do it at all."

"I assume you already have contact information for Mandalika and the rest."

"Mandalika, yes. Some of the others, no. So if you still keep in touch . . . ."

"Sure. They will be happy to hear from you."

“I'd like to set up a time with you, too. Couple hours? To start with. I look forward to hearing Mandalika’s take, of course, but she has something of a vested interest in Zimara the hero.”

“You think I don't? Mandalika's OK. Maybe not so introspective —she's like your mom that way— but she'll tell you the truth.”

“I'll talk to them all. Can I start with you?”

Avbury drains her glass and pockets the cigarettes. "I'll be here till Wednesday. I’ll comm." She stands. "Look, the story I know is about a lot of women. Write about them all. And how they did it. That's what we need to know." Gret stands and drops cash on the table. They embrace again. Avbury holds her at arms' length for a moment, studying the face she has not seen in so many years. "Lovely to see, you. Really," Avbury says.

§ BRIDE

● What God Has Joined Together

The songs of the women ring the slopes above Zalman Valley, punctuated by the beat of the hoes into deep black soil.
Bring the rainfall to the earth
Bring the sunshine to the day
Let the children join the dance
Bring my lover back to me.

Arms and voices rise and fall, drumming in this new Spring day. Twenty women wrapped in blue and red and ivory. Mothers, sisters, daughters, friends. Little kids range with baskets among the flowers, picking what they can eat or plait. Fewer now— they've lost some neighbors. Two dogs run with the kids; a third sits snoozing in the shade. Far below, the sun catches the bell tower of Sankta Katarina, and the red tile roofs of Echmash begin to emerge from the fog.

When the women spot the glint of moving metal in the road below, their song falters a bit, then drops into silence. The wind, the bugs, the sweat on their shoulders. Yesenya starts to cry. She's eleven, skinny, wispy platinum hair tucked into a scarf of gold braid. A gift, but she cries. Her birthday was like a funeral.

Her married sister Filipa wraps Yesenya's shoulders from behind, murmurs kind words. Lights flash on the road, stop at Echmash village. Yesenya's cousin Zimara shakes her head. "It's not right." No one looks at her. Yesenya's sister cries a little, too.

The Crusaders killed Yesenya’s parents. They figure they’ve more than made it up to her by selling her to the young tough Konsta.

Zimara calls Gret and lays a hand on her shoulder. Gret is Zimara's daughter. In a couple years Gret may be in Yesenya’s position. Zimara tells her, "Please, we need some water. Take Yesenya and your brother." There's a raucous creek not a hundred meters away, hidden by a line of trees.

"No," says Hana, watching the road. Two jeeps have started up the hillside. "It's Konsta. He's come for his bride.”

"Konsta said after Pentecost." Zimara had some idea she could find the money to send Yesenya to her grandmother in Ogonyok. She was counting on having a few weeks. She was unrealistic.

Hana shakes her head. “Does you no good to complain. They've all been called back to Rudomil. Konsta won't leave without his wife. Don't make it harder." Hana is a rugged old woman. Her husband used to be village mayor, before the Crusaders swept in and installed their own. Now Detsch does his

best to stay out of their way. But Hana knows how to make herself useful to the authorities, and doesn't much care which one.

The boy Aloyzi tugs at Zimara's sleeve. "Who are they, mom?" He's just five. He doesn't understand.

She looks down, nods to her kids. "Water. Go now." Gret and Aloyzi head to the creek with buckets, slowly, looking back with curiosity. The women tell the other kids to go with them. All the kids but Yesenya.

Hana lifts the hoe, crashes it to the ground. Again, again. The other women wait, hands twisting on their tools.

Captain Blago is the first out of the jeep, a young guy, handsome, energetic. His golden hair curls at his neck. His smile is as famous as his ax. He takes off his shades. "Morning, girls. How are you all today?" Behind him four others with black armbands and silver crosses dangling from their necks. There's a machinegun mounted on Blago's jeep, and the men carry various weaponry slung from their shoulders. Hana keeps breaking the ground with her hoe.

"Hey, girls, be careful with my dirt!" Blago jokes. He scoops up a handful, turns to show his men. "Best land in Rudeny." As the newest, grandest landowner in Echmash, he has good reason to be pleased. Two months before, in heavy fighting, the Crusaders ran off scores of Muslim and several Christian families. Now Blago and other Crusader commanders own farms all across the valley.

Blago tosses the dirt to one side. His eyes sweep the little group of women. "Ah! Is this her?" Blago points to Yesenya. "What's your name, sweetie?"

Yesenya makes a sound they can barely hear.

Blago grabs a short, weedy-head kid by the arm, drags him forward. "Your husband has brought you a fine gift. Go on, show her."

Konsta shifts from foot to foot, glancing at the girl, then takes his hand out of his pocket to show her the sparkly necklace. Blago pushes him toward the girl, tells her, "Go on, take it. Isn't it fine?" He winks at the Crusaders, turns back to Yesenya. "And if you want to kiss him, just pretend we're not here." Blago laughs. Another man laughs.

The girl's eyes widen when she sees the jewelry. Then she covers her face and sobs. Konsta stares at the ground.

Zimara is shocked as well. "That's Yadranka's necklace. Konsta, you asshole. You took that from Yadranka." Yadranka's family disappeared during the fight for the village. Until now, no one was sure what had happened to them. They could have run off.

Hana stops swinging for a moment, then starts again. She looks at no one. Filipa tightens her grip on Yesenya.

Zimara steps between Yesenya and the Crusaders. "Look, Konsta, you don't need to take her with you now. It's dangerous up there. We'll take good care of her. You'll see her when you get back."

"Konsta can take care of his own wife," Blago says. "Back off."

"Don't take her," Zimara tells him. "Come back later."

"Sure," Blago grins, and backhands her casually, but so fast she doesn't see it coming. Zimara falls to her knees, blood gushing from mouth and nose.

"Any other requests? Any little thing," Blago tells the women. He steps toward Yesenya. Fists clenched, the women make way, one by one. He takes the girl by the arm and drags her from her sister. He turns to see Zimara on her feet, hoe raised like a club.

"Leave her be." Zimara is a short woman, but stocky and strong; the rusty metal head weaves in the air like a cobra. Her hands are bloody where she has wiped her face. Blago grins with delight.

“Let it go, Zee,” Hana warns.

They hear a distant cry. It's Zimara's kids racing back from the creek, but Zimara is not distracted. She keeps her eyes on Blago. The Crusader Sejad steps up behind her and kicks the back of her knee, and Zimara drops again. Blago thrusts the girl at Konsta, then leans over woman on the ground.

"What's that?" He cups a hand behind his ear. "I didn't get that." When Zimara gets to her knees, he kicks her in the belly, face, belly . . . counterpoint to the chop chop chop of Hana's hoe. Aloyzi and Gret run through the flowers crying. Blago stops after a while, puffing a bit. With a gesture, he invites his pals to join in, all but Konsta, who has to slug Yesenya to keep her still. Zimara's son reaches the little tableau, launches at Blago, while Hana intercepts Gret and drags her back.

Blago slaps Aloyzi and lifts him by the jacket collar. "Whose pup is this?"

Zimara sits up, propped on one hand. She tries to say something, spits blood instead.

"Yorg's. Both of them," Sejad says.

"One of ours?"

"One True, says the priest."

Still dangling the boy, Blago digs in a pocket for his comm. He thumbs in a few digits, reads the screen, nods. "Pays his dues, comes when we call." He pats Aloyzi on the head. "You're a lucky boy." Then he swings Aloyzi by an arm and flings him as far as he can. The boy lands meters away in the mud, gasping for breath. "Tell this Yorg, they need to be housebroken."

Blago nudges the boy's mom with a boot. "Bring her." He stoops again, yanking her head up. "You want to go with the girl? OK. You go."

Yesenya's sister lifts Aloyzi, turns his head away. Gret wails, struggling in Hana's arms.

"My light, it's OK," Zimara gurgles. "Never mind. I'll be back soon." She'd like to smile reassuringly, but her battered face won't work.

"Sure," Blago tells the kids. "We'll take her to the hospital. She'll be back in no time." They toss her in the first jeep, next to Sejad. As he gets in, Blago waves to the women. "Good girls! Take care of my land."

● Not D.O.A.

Avbury smokes while she berates someone on the phone. "We discussed this already. Any gifts come out of your end. That's why we pay you so well. 'My good friend at Customs,' you said." She's got one hand over her left ear, because of the noise from the generator by the surgery. Age 50 maybe, tall, spare, cropped yellow hair turning gray. "I can send a truck tomorrow, if that will help," she tells her caller. "If not, maybe we need to change our arrangement. Perhaps you are not the man I need."

A younger dark-haired woman in denim jacket, boots, muffler comes across the lot from the intake center. Avbury holds the comm to her shoulder, eyebrows raised. Miryam tells her, "You should see this. A little worse than usual."

Avbury says into the comm, "If I have to call my own friends at the Ministry, why would I need you? I have to go. I hope to see you here this time tomorrow. Otherwise . . . ." She listens a moment. "Otherwise, have a good life." She pockets the device.

"The WHO meds?" asks Miryam, as they stride toward intake.

Avbury shakes her head. "Something else. What's up?"

"They found another body in the river this morning. On the riverbank. She's still alive, sort of. You'll see."

They enter the intake center: a flurry of peasant women, med staff in dirty whites, stretcher bearers navigating among makeshift tables, first aid stations lining tent walls, rows of chairs, cables snaking everywhere for the lights and computers. There is order here, certainly more than when they set up a year ago, but new volunteers find it baffling. New Start Transition Settlement, a fragile way station between war and an unknown future.

Doctor Nzangiye leans over an motionless form on a cot. "Busted nose, jaw, ribs, busted arm, likely concussion, sexual assault for sure. There was a rope around her neck, and they yanked it. Can't tell yet about internal bleeding. And this." Delicately he turns the woman's head. The left side is slashed

temple to jaw, ear to nose. The raw swollen skin bunches out in bloody ridges. "Haven't seen this before." Nzangiye arrived a couple weeks ago, can still be surprised.

"It's a crucifix," Miryam explains. "The Crusaders' holy war on women."

“They found her a long way from Crusader territory,” Nzangiye notes.

Miryam explains, “They do that sometimes when they attack Christian women; they dump them far away. Avoids quarrels in the villages.”

"I see they took her ear, too,” Avbury says. “They didn't want anyone to find her." Lately the One Trues have taken to stapling GPS trackers to women’s ears.

Nzangiye tips his head toward the other women waiting for help. "Look at the others." They’d clustered around at first, murmuring sympathetically. Seeing the slashed face they shrink back with muttered prayers and signs of the cross. "They've seen this before."

“Yes, but not often. Not so savage.” Avbury holds one finger of the injured woman’s slack hand. “Why do they hate you, girl?” In her year here, Avbury has learned a little of the language.

Miryam wonders, "And how the hell did she pull herself out of the river?"

The woman on the cot swallows, tries to speak. Miryam bends low to listen, then straightens out, fists bunched. "She says she wants to die."

This makes Avbury mad. It’s like spitting on her work. She sees destruction, day after day; she struggles to be hopeful; she is impatient with hopelessness in others. Avbury grips the woman's shoulder, gets in her face. "Then you should have swallowed the river. But you didn’t. You came to us.” Avbury straightens up. “We're going to fix you up." The doctor points to the doorway. "When you can walk out, you can go to hell. Don’t be in such a damn hurry!" She squeezes the injured woman’s shoulder, hard. Zimara’s eyes focus for the first time.

She tugs Avbury's sleeve. "My kids."

"We'll find them. Rest." Avbury says to Miryam, "Find out what happened. Get their names." Then the boss heads out again, to other duties.

● Holy War

Avbury’s crew set up New Start a few months after the war started. For years a gang of generals ran the country. When the economic crisis swept the continent, the generals could no longer pay off all their cronies. Control systems started to fray. Mass demonstrations erupted all over the country, people demanding elections. Soldiers started shooting. Death squads targetted the democratic leadership, and the movement faltered. For a time it looked like the regime would survive the unrest, as it had in the 1950s, and in 1989. Then the Saray massacre: sixty people, including lawmakers and sons of the nobility, machine-gunned on the steps of the cathedral. Civilian technocrats, heretofore faithful servants of the dictatorship, hastily packed their bags.

The generals, huddled in their war room, got a visit from a slim young woman from the European Union. She did not introduce herself; they’d already gotten a call.

“Sorry, I can’t sit,” she told them. “Got a plane waiting.” She passed around files in burgundy leather covers. The sheets inside simply listed each general’s assets in the EU: beachfront palaces, shares in tech companies and film studios, clandestine accounts in offshore jurisdictions around the world.

“Damn!” remarked one officer, and whistled, impressed with his own greed. “Not bad.” He peered over the shoulder of the colonel next to him. “Let me see.” The colonel snapped shut his file and stepped back with a glare.

“We pull the plug in a month,” the emissary announced. “One month. The politicians are arguing already about how to divide it all up.”

The junta called elections for the end of the month. It took longer for the winning liberals to set up the new government. By then the generals were gone to the islands, folding away the dustcovers, remodeling the kitchens, landscaping the gardens at their little homes away from home.

Back in Rudeny, some people didn't like the new arrangement— many junior officers who'd barely begun to get rich when the dictatorship collapsed, and the leaders of the rightist religious movement who had expected to inherit but did not. The coalition of democratic parties, weakened by losing so many leaders during the months of violence, dithered and blundered. Soon squads of ex-soldiers were attacking government offices in the capital, and taking over villages by the border. They called themselves Crusaders, fighting holy war to restore God's kingdom. By that first autumn after the elections, tens of thousands of refugees were streaming towards safety in government-held territory. Terrorized, starved, beaten, raped, they are the lucky ones.

● Male Bondage

Blago and the boys are sitting around the campfire, boasting. Well, actually, guzzling plum brandy and scarfing spinach pie at the One True bar in Obeyyed. Moments like this, Captain Blago feels like a sort of dad to these teens, young fellas a little wet behind the ears, maybe, but also enthusiastic and hard-working. Under his tutelage they are growing strong and true. He watches their hi-jinks with a foggy nostalgia. Reminds Blago of himself at their age, a half decade ago.

Konsta has had too much to drink. Today's Kingdom action puts him in mind of a personal project a year ago.

"I loved her. She was so sweet," he says, and lurches upright. "Should never a done it."

"Things happen. Be a man," Sejad tells him.

"Get over it already. You been moaning for a year," says Bogorol. "Now you got that little chicky Yesenya to console you. You don't want her? Let me take her for a ride." Ho ho. The boys agree, they wouldn't mind taking Konsta's fiancee age eleven for a ride.

"Anyway, she deserved it, am I right?" says Ratko, referring to Konsta's earlier girlfriend. He waves his bottle at his comrades. "Am I right? I'm right."

"Tell him about how you left Germany," another prompts their commander. "Listen to this. This is crazy funny."

Blago, a bit wasted himself, tries to remember what was so funny. Blago hated Germany. Stuck in a tech park cubicle all day, churning out cookie-cutter designs for commware at half the pay of the German employees, because the Eurozone doesn't recognize engineering degrees from Rudeny. He could read German but never learned to speak more than a few tech phrases.

"I'm a prince, did you know that?" he says now. Yes, the boys have heard it all before. Blago is second cousin to the great-grandchild of the thirteenth bastard of the Ogum Subotni, ruler of some grim mountainside in the 1700s. Or so his momma told him.

"You're a prince, did you know that?" she would say when he came home from school crying. "Those brutes! One day they'll crawl at your feet." She would kiss his forehead, and kiss him on the lips. "Yes. My little prince," she'd say.

"Tell Konsta how you got out of Germany," Sejad urges.

Ah, the guestworker ghettos. Just another immigrant, interchangeable with thousands more from a dozen countries. His own boss couldn't tell the difference. His boss called all the immigrants Ali. "Hey, Ali, where's that schema?" he'd say. Or, "Hey, Ali, what happened to your towel?" He'd say this to Blago, who hates Muslims.

Blago got paid every other Friday. After work he'd pull from a locker his pointy Friday shoes and shiny fake leather jacket and walk the four miles to the entertainment zone, where he'd hire a woman (always from a brothel, never from the street, Blago is picky that way) and take a cab two blocks to an

emigre bar. There the staff would set him at his usual table by the restroom and he would buy two bottles of brandy and hold court with anyone who'd listen to his rants about the corruption of the West, and his sure-fire schemes to get rich. The wait staff knew him as Blago Every Other Friday.

Blago drank little himself, and when his liquor and audience were gone he'd wander the streets for hours, rolling a drunk or two and hating passersby he could not safely rob. When he got back to his flat a little after dawn, he'd kick out his girlfriend so he could get some sleep.

She was seventeen, a German runaway. She got pregnant. Then Blago lost his job in the bank crisis. He had no money.

O yes, here's the funny part.

His girlfriend wouldn't come back to Rudeny with him. She still had her job. Blago insisted. "She don't want to move. I'm very nice. Come on, honey, I build you a nice house in Saray. No, she don't want no house. I say, OK. You disobey me, I let you stay. Here, baby, like this. That's it. That's it. Now she don't move at all!" Blago has to stop, he's laughing so hard. "What's the matter, baby? She don't say nothing!" The boys guffaw, slap each other on the back.

"Wait. The best thing," Blago continues. "I'm at the railway station. Cops are combing through the crowd with a photocopy in their hands. I'm sweating, you bet. They show me the picture. It's the ID of one of the Muslim guys at my company. My boss gave them the wrong name."

Blago's boys roar with laughter. Tears run down Sejad's cheeks. They break into song:

She wouldn't come with me,
She wanted to stay.
So I raped her and choked her,
and left her for dead.

Bogorol pipes up. "All that spoil her shall be satisfied, says the Lord."

"Shoot at her, spare no arrows," Ratko chimes in.

". . . Her walls are thrown down, take vengeance upon her," the boys finish the verse, and cheer, and call for another round. As the brandy flows, so does scripture. Competitive recitation is a Rudeny tradition, that and wild exaggeration.

The Bible quotes and funny stories go on all night. Eyes closed, Konsta tips slightly to one side and slides stately out of his seat, like a glacier calving into the ocean.

● Still Not Dead

Late at night Miryam stops by Avbury's makeshift office, the older woman lit by the computer screen. Avbury asks, "How's she doing? The woman who didn't die."

"She might yet. Nzangiye's trying to get the infection under control. She ate a little, though. Her name is Zimara."

● City on a Hill

The Monastery of Sankt Rudomil is an imposing fortress guarding Ullaq pass between the Kulkhiz coast and Rudeny plateau, just inside the Kulkhiz border. The monastery has been a cultural center and bulwark of the faith since Byzantine times. Lords and kings bestowed on it treasures and vast lands, in exchange for keeping the pass for their armies, for hosting high-born hostages during ransom negotiations, and as a source of sinecures for second sons of the nobility. The Mongols, the Turks, the Russians have come and gone, sweeping away the loose parts of foundations and faith, leaving the hard bitter core, like the black-rock plug to an eroded volcano.

In recent times the monastery has gained new importance as the motherhouse of the movement to purge the church of corruptions old and new. Calling themselves keepers of the One True Faith, the activists have cells throughout the villages, the army, and the traditional aristocracy in both Kulkhiz and Rudeny. The movement has been smouldering at the edges of religious life for near a century, but it wasn't until the collapse of the Rudeny dictatorship that it burst into flame. One Trues cannot abide the godless liberals in Rudeny's new government. Now they wage war to reclaim the land for the Lord.

Not too many monks about any more— the life is rigorous, the plumbing poor. Instead, thanks to the patronage of the Kulkhiz government, the magnificent old halls swarm with swaggering Crusaders. Kulkhiz has long sought to seize back the half of Rudeny it once held; failing that, it prefers to keep its neighbor weak and divided. Just as important, the Crusade is a good way for the generals to export their home-grown jihadists; martyrs suit them better than agitators. So the Kulkhiz generals have given Rudomil over to the holy warriors— their home away from home, their own little highland Pentagon, until they can take back Rudeny.

Hidris town sprawls below the walls. As a gateway to the Eurozone, Ullaq Pass supports the liveliest smuggling trade on the continent. Pawn shops line Redemption Street, the dusty main drag, alongside pirated goods factories and gun stores, full to bursting with piles and crates of the sturdy old reliables and the glitzy electronics-draped newest war wizardry. The businessmen reserve the back-alley warehouses for more controversial merchandise, chiefly pharmaceuticals and knock-off medical sensors. This borderland has also become a sort of high tech corridor, with shiny chem labs forbidden elsewhere, making an ever-shifting array of designer drugs, to keep one nimble step ahead of Europe's clunky drug laws (and perhaps, though the Crusaders are not privy to this knowledge, undertaking a project or two for the Kulkhiz military's shadowy biowar unit). The factories gush foul wastes into ravines slashed into the mountainside.

Hidris' entrepreneurs are agile, quick to seize new opportunities. They have imported teams of computer hackers, stealing data for corporate wars worldwide. Just now they've started a score of banks— well, a warehouse or two with mailboxes and servers for ten thousand fake corporations. The more established money-laundering principalities —Jersey, Cyprus, that lot— are not sweating the competition just yet.

Here, too, visitors find the grandest brothels —gorgeous neo-Empire facades hanging from dramatic slopes and crags— once serviced by hundreds of girls and boys from throughout the Balkans, Ukraine and Caucasus, a sort of breaking-in cage for human chattel on its way to the gangsters of the western capitals.

For years Rudeny generals controlled the flow of drugs and children from further east, and split the take with their counterparts in Kulkhiz. It was primarily a licensing operation— you pay our fees, or the soldiers will shut you down. And as with all effective cartels and mafias, the generals played an important regulatory role as well— ensuring their customers quality and steady supply, but cutting production whenever prices fell too fast. The global economic crisis put a big squeeze on the racket. Profits evaporated with falling demand in the Eurozone, while new anti-immigrant laws made it harder for the slavers to export.

As the Rudeny dictatorship unraveled, the generals cashed in and fled to tasteful or tacky palaces in sunny islands. Today in Minorca there's a street of bars dedicated to the uplift of a population of laconic, steely-eyed drivers and bodyguards, muttering in half a dozen eastern languages. Locals call it Little Rudeny.

The country's junior officers, though, did not have such pleasing prospects. For years they served their superiors for a tiny fraction of the profits, on the promise that one day they'd inherit the whole shooting gallery, as it were. The fledgling democratic government promises to derail all that. Faced with the prospect of living on public salary, with none of their customary perqs, many officers feel their loyalties waver. Just as galling, the new democracy shows little respect for military status— the medals,

the heroic statues, the marching bands. The One True movement promises a return to the glorious traditions of the authoritarian past.

These days the brothels are half empty. When trafficking scandals prompted the first NATO intervention, Archbishop Eddie Nagahry, spiritual father of the One Trues, clamped a lid on the slave trade. "Our priority must be to reconquer the land of our ancestors," he tells the Crusader command. "Then all is given to us."

In the meantime, the local entrepreneurs have set up elaborate porn production facilities, using women from the conquered provinces. They specialize in product for the Eastern despotisms— nothing like hearing "Harder, baby, harder!" in your own language, and the mullahs and mandarins pay top dollar. So the Crusade never lacks funding, while the Kulkhizan junta laughs at the occasional threat of economic sanctions by indignant diplomats from the democracies.

Early on a prospective business partner, not quite believing his good luck in acquiring so powerful a sponsor as the Archbishop (and not sure yet whether it was luck or a boa's fond embrace), sought reassurance: "Holy Joy, I welcome your proposal, but I am a tiny bit surprised, given your other . . . responsibilities. I wouldn't like to hear a year from now, say, that the concerns of your congregants force you to suspend our agreement. That someone has gone to the cops, maybe." He purses his lips. "Not good for business. You'll find we take business very seriously here in Hidris."

The holy man instructed, "You pitiful sinner. You should be on your knees, begging forgiveness. Don't you understand true faith? It's the women who have turned their backs on the Lord. Doesn't Moses tell us that women cause us to betray the Lord? The prophet calls them a plague, and commands us, 'Kill every woman who has known man by lying with him . . . But all the young girls keep alive for yourselves.' These diseased devils have cast themselves from his sight. They are hellbound whores, given to you to do with as you will." Nagahry pokes the pornographer below the ribs. "Whereas you, because of your service to the Church, still have a chance —just a chance— to make it into Heaven. Don't fuck it up."

This is Hidris town, shining City on the Hill, the new Jerusalem, where Konsta brings Yesenya late at night. Crusader princes are building gimcrack palaces above the town. Being so low in the hierarchy — just another greedy kid, not too picky about his employment— Konsta must settle for the barracks in the monastery, while Yesenya gets a corner of the floor in one of the old brothels in town. The soldiers call it the Nunnery.

● Nunnery

Vyolka runs the barracks for Crusader wives and girlfriends. She turns Konsta away and brings the girl through the darkened old house, a TV flickering behind a door, some sad old love song wavering on a comm. They climb the squawking back steps to an attic space where the dim light from the corridor shows eight girls sprawled elbow to elbow on stained foam mattresses on the floor. A couple of the girls turn uneasily.

"I'll get you a mattress tomorrow. For now, you have room over there."

Yesenya slips off the flip-flops, steps over the others, and curls up in a corner. The floor is freezing. When the door closes, a voice:

"What's your name, little girl?"

"Yesenya Hedrosik." In the scant light from the bottom of the door, Yesenya can barely make out the long form of the girl who speaks.

"I'm Taline." Taline scoots back a little on the mat. "Tonight you may sleep here, Yesenya Hedrosik."

Yesenya slides in beside the big girl, wriggling to get most of herself off the floor. Taline slings an arm over Yesenya's shoulder and in a minute they're both asleep.

• Arasely's Story

For three days Arasely Solay stays by Zimara's side, fetching food and bedpans, washing the injured woman. At first, in her delirium, Zimara imagines it's her long-dead mother. At night Arasely sleeps on the floor by Zimara's cot. The third night Zimara asks why.

"Why do you help? I'm no kin to you."

Arasely shrugs. "They told me how you helped Yesenya." They know each other from the village, though not very well. Arasely has been here a month already, but comms now and again with her brother in Echmash. She has three children, still in Echmash.

"I didn't help. They took her."

"When they took the Muslims from the bus, I watched," Arasely replies.

Zimara lies still, eyes closed. "They murdered old Echevit. They attacked Yadranka's family and took their home. My man Yorg took part." She opens her eyes to look at Arasely. "In Echmash, we all watched."

Arasely continues sponging Zimara's arms and shoulders, and starts to weep quietly. The women on cots nearby shift uneasily but say nothing. In these regions, cries in the night are common.

Zimara reaches out to clasp Arasely's hand. "I heard about the bus," Zimara says.

Arasely looks at her, tries to speak, can't. She squeezes the sponge in the pan of water, and wipes dried pus and blood from the edges of Zimara's dressings. "Tell me," Zimara says.

"You know!"Arasely hisses. Of course Zimara knows, everyone knows. But they don't know what Arasely knows.

After a minute, Zimara repeats: "Tell me."

So Arasely expels the words that have been rooting through her brain for so long: how one morning a truckload of Crusaders stopped the bus returning from Obeyyed market, how men with Kraters boarded it, how they drove it to an old mill off the Echmash road. First they made the driver and the Muslims get off. There was an old Jew, too, a field hand with bags of grain and a tin of kerosene, and he had to get off. Nine people. The holy warriors waved their guns and made the men from the bus take off their clothes and fold them and put them in the back of the truck. Then the Crusaders lined up the men by the creek and shot them, blowing away their genitals. One man pitched forward, and the Crusaders made the women drag his body into the water.

"We watched from the bus," Arasely explains. "We kept our mouths shut. We hoped they would kill the Muslims and leave us alone."

The Crusaders made the Muslim women take off their clothes and fold them and put them in the truck. They took their rings and jewelry. Some of it the soldiers put on, laughing, some they collected in a canvass bag. Then they raped the women and shot them.

"Then they called the rest of us out of the bus. 'Come on out, we won't hurt you,' the squad leader waved. A young man, curly hair, a big smile. Blago, they called him. He fingered the stolen necklace he'd draped over his shoulders, over a chain and a crucifix. 'We just have to check for contraband,' he told us. A woman from Obeyyed cried and held on to the back of a seat, but a soldier smashed her hand with his gun. We got off and put all our stuff in the back of the truck.

"What they did to us . . . they weren't in any hurry. Then Blago checked his comm, and told his men to finish. 'Good girls,' he smiled at us. They drove off in the bus and the truck. They left us our clothes. We walked back to the road."

The women flagged down a farmer passing by in a tractor. He wouldn't let them come near, but he called a number they gave him. Soon some men drove down from Echmash, including Arasely's brother Luan. He held out a backpack with some clothes and food. She looked at him with astonishment.

"Look, there's another bus coming by this afternoon. You go to Saray. Maybe that camp."

"My children! I have to get back!"

"He doesn't want you back," Luan explained, meaning her husband. "He doesn't want to see you now."

"You can't do this. Please!"

"We'll watch out for your kids. Don't worry."

"He's afraid. That asshole."

Luan shrugged. "He doesn't know what to do." Rape is a big insult to a husband. Either the woman invited the assault, and he must kill her, or he must find and kill the rapist. Arasely's beloved wants no quarrel with the Crusaders.

Luan pressed a fistful of riyals into her hand. "It's best you go. Later, we'll try to get you back. I'll make sure the kids are OK."

So Arasely and most of the other women waited for the next bus. When the driver saw them, he sped up again without stopping. Why borrow trouble? The women started walking.

Two days later, Blago's boys attacked Echmash itself. Two weeks after that, the women from the bus walked into New Start camp.

Arasely wipes her face as she finishes the story. "What you did for Yesenya . . . . I miss my children."

Zimara says, "I'm sorry, I need a bedpan."

When Arasely returns from the latrine, a nurse is at Zimara's side, dosing her again against the pain. Before Zimara drifts off, she grips Arasely's hand again.

"We'll go back to Echmash. We'll get our kids. I promise you."

"Yes. We'll do it together." In a minute Zimara's asleep.

● Morning Lesson

Shaken awake, Yesenya loses the dream of the blue beast in the forest.

"Let's go!" Hands push her from behind, elbows clip her sides, someone almost knocks her over as she bends to find her flip-flops. They get fifteen minutes at the toilets, then line up shivering in the driveway. Constellations wheel overhead with a roar too loud to be heard.

"You're the new one?" A big-fisted, wild-haired woman peers at Yesenya in the lamplight from a window.

Yesenya nods politely. "Yesenya Hedrosik," she says.

"You call me Goranka. Do what I say and stay out of my way. Right?"

"Yes."

Goranka looks up and down the line, then back at Yesenya. She clocks the girl upside the head with a streaking backhand. At first, Yesenya is too stunned to cry.

"Right?" says Goranka. "Otherwise it hurts."

Cupping her cheek, Yesenya nods.

Goranka spot-checks the girls' backpacks to make sure they haven't stolen any food.

"OK, girls, up we go." They climb onto the back of the truck while Goranka gets in front.

A girl with short blonde hair tells Yesenya, "She does that to all the new girls. Don't worry. She won't do it again for a while."

"But you can't duck," a third girl warns. She is tiny, with some kind of rash on her face and lips. "Then she hits you really hard. My name is Vlasta." Shyly, she offers her hand.

Yesenya clasps it. Vlasta, age ten, is carrying a drooling two-year-old in a pack on her shoulders.

"Who's this?" Yesenya smiles.

"This is Emrush." She tugs the kid's tiny fist. "Say hi, Emrush."

"I'm Nika," interrupts the blonde. "I've got golden hair."

"Did you forget me already?" a tall dark-haired girl squeezes in beside Yesenya. "I'm Taline." Lively eyes, sculptured cheeks.

"I remember. I couldn't see your face."

"I'm fourteen," she announces; older than the rest. "We'll take care of you. Just do what we do."

"We are the Skylanders," says Vlasta. "Do you want to be a one, too?"

"Give her a chance," Taline says. "She just got here. She has to make up her own mind. Anyway," she pats Yesenya's hand, "Don't worry about Goranka." Taline waves a dismissive hand. "She's a lesbian, you know."

"O," says Yesenya. She has no idea what that means, and neither does Taline.

• Toilets

The truck trundles uphill through the main gates of the monastery, and drops off the girls in one of the courtyards. They pull down mops and buckets and soap; their morning job is toilets and floors. The monks haven't changed their toilet habits in eight hundred years, so the facilities are none the best; lots of hosing and mopping to be done. The monks used to clean up after themselves, as a way to earn points for their tickets to heaven. The Crusaders, having slaughtered so many infidels, need no extra stars in their crowns. You'd think you'd be able to store up spiritual extra credits and trade them in for, say, a nice thermobaric projectile. But no. It's another of God's mysteries.

At least they've got these hundreds of girls and women. The Crusaders work hard to clean up the country. Let the women clean up the shit. What better training for new and soon-to-be Crusader brides?

The place is vast. High walls block the starlight. Goranka dispatches girls in all directions, and heads off with Yesenya to the offal pits below the slaughterhouse. This place is nasty. Yesenya can barely breathe. Goranka tells Yesenya what to do, and, arms crossed, watches her for 10 minutes. "I'll be back in an hour," Goranka warns. "This better be clean, because you're going to have lunch on this floor." But Yesenya doesn't see Goranka till the afternoon. Instead, Nika comes to show her the next job. Miles of toilets— a step up.

• Founding Fathers

Doctor Sevik likes to start his morning in the Tower of Penance, in his office overlooking the oratory. That way he can hear the monks chant in the new day. God's music exalts him. How near to Jesus! It puts him in just the right mood for his holy task.

Sevik likes the tower's name, too, so evocative of sacred suffering, and builds an interrogation room on the second floor to keep all his pastimes ready to hand. Of course he has to soundproof it, so as not to drown out the angelic song next door.

The good doctor knows every word of the ancient chants— he used to teach church liturgy at the university in Saray. One of his first moves on coming to Rudomil was to require the monks to ditch the new cycle, a brash innovation from 1383, and go back to the tunes sung originally under Justinian.

Sevik's aesthetic genius was not always so well appreciated. The university, for example: they downgraded his department the very year he got his degree. "The students want electronics," the dean said. "Besides, we got big grants from Wetware and ReEngineer, and we're lining up research contracts, too. Personally, I like church music. Very soothing. But let's leave it to the monasteries. Rudomil can do that sort of thing much better than we can."

Nevertheless, Sevik continued teaching part-time while trying to turn his thesis into a popular history. When his old professors stomped off indignantly, waiting in vain for student outcry to restore the liturgy program, the dean was happy to replace them with newly minted Doctor Sevik, at one quarter the salary.

Two years later Sevik gave birth to his mutant magnum opus, *Sacred Font of the Nation*, by which he proved that early Rudenyans invented the wheel, brought fire down from heaven, built pyramids for the Egyptians, and designed the first touchscreen. In providing a glorious past for this struggling nation, *Sacred* became an overnight sensation, especially among the desperate professional class, the elbow-patch aristocracy, and hungry junior officers too long held back by smug and stodgy superiors. The university kicked him out, though, for making up shit. His wife, daughter of one of the old aristocrats, left him for someone who still had a job.

Young Sevik couldn't cut the umbilicus. He got a cheap place near his old classrooms, and plunged into the rowdy political scene on campus.

Sacred Font came out at an auspicious moment. The democracy movement was reaching critical mass across the country, sparking in turn an intense backlash from the ruling generals, on the one hand, and the imperilled clergy and nobility on the other. The first big clashes took place at the university.

Today Sevik gets a visit from his old student Flem. Flem was one of the original group of patriots Sevik recruited to cleanse the university of polluting western thought. Amateurs at first, their idea of a good time was to stalk the two woman professors, trash their bikes, stuff shit in their mail boxes, slide gruesome threats under their doors. They firebombed the country's only gay bar, just off campus. Friday nights were special, no homework, so they might kidnap a classmate for the weekend and rape her— for instructional purposes only, of course.

The Friday outings turned out to be a great recruiting tool; pretty soon they had a hundred members, not all students. Sevik had them wear white shirts and bow ties, and trim their hair close, and he designed for them a heavy knuckle-duster ring with an S coiled over a crucifix. They called themselves Submit to the Lord— Submit for short. Sevik has kept the name for his current team of torturers.

As the democratic movement grew, Sevik found his boys gainful employment as a sort of Junior League adjunct to the PoPo, the Political Police, the generals' special enforcers. Submit's job was to squeal on democratic activists and break up their meetings— the beginnings of Sevik's career in covert ops.

Naturally, with all this missionary work, the Submit boys might miss a class now and again, or the deadline for a term paper. But only one prof ever gave them a failing grade. They taught him a lesson, and the rest of the faculty, too.

Flem proved an early star of the student patriots, and has risen in tandem with Sevik's own fortunes. Not every one of Sevik's students proved so reliable. "What happened to Mayrd?" Doctor Sevik remembers asking his boys.

Feet shuffled, eyes darted back and forth, until Flem volunteered, "Chickened out on us. Couldn't take it."

So the doctor gave his boys the pep talk, one he was to repeat and elaborate many times in the years to come. "I know it's hard on you. Very upsetting. Your mommas didn't raise you to do this work. But this is war, the most important war that has ever been fought, our Savior against the army of abortionists, and each of us must sacrifice. I think of Christ scourged, nailed to the Cross, speared, a crown of thorns piercing his head, torrents of blood streaming down His blessed face . . . ." and here he would go into liquid detail, staring at the far wall as if seeing it all on a screen.

"Christ did all that for us, and we rebel against such a tiny sacrifice for Him? So," his gaze returns to his recruits, "I know it's hard. If anyone would like to see me about it, my door is always open. But think of our sacred purpose. Are you ready to sacrifice? Are you ready to be men of God?"

One of his crew leaders got to the point: "So, what about Mayrd?"

Doctor Sevik asked, "Do you think he'll talk to the prosecutors?" At that time, the courts were not quite completely controlled by the generals. They were trying to strike a deal with the European Union.

"No, no. He just doesn't have the stomach for our mission."

"A little girly, is he?" Sevik shrugged elaborately. "Well, that's OK. So long as he doesn't shoot his mouth off. Because if it gets out about what you've done, they'll bury you in prison. You know that, don't you? What would happen to your mothers, your girlfriends?"

Mayrd was their first murder. But as the democratic movement spilled off campus, as strikes and demonstrations spread across the country, the PoPo grew frantic, handing out lists and money with a free hand. Submit took on more and more of the work, kidnapping and murdering insurgent leaders and their families, or people who looked like them, or people whose names starting with the same letter, or people seen with fat purses, or people who had foolishly loaned money to Submit friends and family. . . .

In looking back for the origins of the Crusade, journalists and historians cite Submit's leading role in the first systematic murder of democratic activists. Some observers suggest that the current weakness of the liberal government traces back to that period of the uprising, when almost every day passersby would stumble on the mangled bodies of movement leaders. The strongest and smartest of a generation, dismembered and strewn in basements, garbage bins, and back lots.

Sevik's leadership brought him to the attention of the Army, especially the young officers who did not share the generals' hesitation to strike with full force. They became increasingly restless; seeing the bloodshed at university, they hated to be left behind. Some of these officers had just formed a secret brotherhood called Cross and Sword, led by a general's son, the staff major who now calls himself Brother Michael.

This day Sevik and his former student chat about old times before they get to business. Flem is here to pitch a new project. He has learned of a government health program to combat cholera in the countryside. The civil war has so devastated water supplies that thousands of people are in effect drinking their own feces. So the government wants to send in teams to treat the water and treat the sick.

"Another conspiracy to enslave our people," Flem figures, "force them to depend on government when they should be praying to the King of Kings."

"I'm sure you have a suggestion."

It just so happens that Flem does. "The government asked the bishop in Saray to endorse the program, ease the way for them in the villages. He refused, of course. And he sent us a copy of the project plans, with details about the teams and their schedules."

"What do you need from me?"

"Give me ten men and ten weeks. I believe we can eliminate this Western plague."

"Look for the foreigners. Any you can bring me alive, you'll get ten percent." Sevik does not have to explain that Swedes and Germans are the best. Their families and governments are rich, and will pay a lot. Estonians, South Asians, they are a stingy lot.

"I think we can find some. And the boys? How about ten for them?"

Sevik clicks his tongue. "When I say ten percent, I mean you and your crew. You divide it as you see fit. You have no idea what the overhead runs to on these things." (Flem knows exactly what it costs, having done this work locally for years now.) "Might take months to cash in, and I got to feed the hostages, and the guards, and I got to pay off these greedy Kulkhizans to let us use their turf. And after all that, maybe I have to shoot any bright boys who try to escape. I'm taking all the risks here."

Flem leans back and stares at his boss. The professor of sacred music puts his elbows on the desk, clasps his hands together. "Look, you bring me a Westerner, we'll see about getting you, you personally, another five percent. The Archbishop will have to authorize it. It takes resources from our other work, you know."

Flem doesn't like it, but he is not ready to start a row with Doctor Sevik. He will have to secure some allies first. After a minute, he stands and smiles. "Sure. Get me the team, I'll bring you something." He takes a recording leaf from his pocket, tosses it on Sevik's desk. "That school thing we talked about. I think you'll like it."

Sevik does indeed, and forwards it to his own boss, who is holding court somewhere the other side of Ullaq Pass. He is about to add some comments of his own, take a little credit for himself, but he's interrupted by another visitor.

"An American, sir," Sevik's aide tells him. "I have no idea what he wants, but he insists on seeing you. No weapon, seems harmless."

"And no language, I take it. OK, fetch what's his name, the monk with English, then bring them both."

Mr. Polking turns out to be a tall, balding, skinny man in a suit crumpled by too many days in transit, with doughy hands and glasses perched like a fretful sparrow on his quivering schnozz. He carries a slim briefcase with gold latches. "Doctor Sevik, it's so good of you to see me on such notice. I'm such an admirer of yours, we all are, the Coalition I mean . . . ."

Sevik waves him to stop so Brother Matko can translate. "Coalition?" Sevik wants to know.

"Yes, of course, I should say, I'm co-founder of the Coalition to Defend the Faith, we're a pretty new group, but growing fast, churches in twenty states now, and a few Congressmen, too, don't you know. I don't like to brag, but a lot of folks back home are starting to pay attention to our message . . . ."

Sevik halts him again. "So how can we help you?"

"Well, naturally we are very concerned about the attacks on the Faith all over the world, and it heartens us to see your good work here protecting Christians against the atheist Islamist assault on religious freedom. So what I'd like to propose, I came here to propose, we would be very interested if you could come visit us there in the States. I assure you, there are many, many believers who would very much like to hear the story of our modern-day Crusade. In return, I'm sure you'll find . . . ."

Sevik stands and grips Polking's right hand with both of his own. "I am so glad to hear of your important work. We couldn't do this without the prayers of men of faith like yourself all over the world. I think the Archbishop needs to hear about this right away. He is our very own Man of God, away visiting the troops this week, but we can provide an escort, shouldn't take more than a day or two, I think he really needs to hear your important message." Sevik pumps Polking's hand a few more times, then waves to his aide. "Can you see that our guest gets to the Archbishop speedily? He'll take good care of you," Sevik tells the visitor, gripping one hand and propelling him to the door with the other.

"If I might . . . ," Polking tries to say, but his glasses are slipping off and he has to nudge them back with the hand still holding the briefcase.

"Thank you so much for your prayers." Sevik nods to the aide and firmly closes the door after them. "Tourists, can you believe it?" he tells the interpreter monk.

"I wouldn't mind a trip to the U.S.," shrugs Brother Matko. "Hot cha cha," he says hopefully, and does a little dance to demonstrate.

Sevik waves his hand. "Babylon. They have no culture. And their church is just a sad, self-indulgent bastard of the great tradition." Sevik has never set foot outside Kulkhiz and Rudeny, and even Kulkhiz makes him uncomfortable. Kulkhizans wear woolen hats and like spicy foods, and their language includes a bunch of Turkish words that would never pass Rudeny lips.

Later, though, Sevik regrets his hasty judgment. Turns out Mr. Polking bears gifts from the brethren in the West, which the Archbishop unwraps with glee: bricks of shiny credit leaves, whose value disappears like magic into Nagahry's many encrypted rainy day funds; and a promised book tour in the U.S.A., for when the Archbishop writes a book.

● Circuit Court

A frosty morn, but Brother Michael keeps to his routine, flailing away shirtless at the strike column he's set up in the plaza in Loshty Vot. He bellows with each thrust; he likes an audience; he dances this way and that to let the light catch his lovely long muscles. Brother Michael is a handsome young man—tall, slender, broad-shouldered, a trim fleece of beard on his cheeks.

"Yah! Yah!" he yells.

A few meters away some women are heating big tins of water over a smoky bonfire. They cast down their eyes, but Brother Michael feels sure they peek.

In truth, he is not very good at this kind of chop-socky. He likes to smash all right, but gets bored with technique. Took him two years to find a trainer who knew without having to be told: never, ever, put Brother Michael on the mat.

That would be Sergeant-Major Greb, standing by now with a towel and a mirror. In addition to discretion, the Sergeant Major possesses several other skills quite useful to holy war. Not so pretty as his boss, but squat, freckled, crewcut, smash-nosed. A heavy copper crucifix nestles in the gray hairs of his chest; on closer inspection, it's made of two .300 Tsolkho casings hammered flat and fused together. Greb wears a strap on his forearm holding a short, broad blade. Fine white scars crisscross Greb's fat knuckles. Likes to work with his hands, you see.

For Brother Michael, son of a general, Greb is the very ideal of a good soldier: brave, loyal, savage, earthy and ugly; possessed of a certain low cunning, Michael believes, yet not quite smart enough to think for himself. The self-appointed, God-anointed general likes to think of himself as down wit' da peepl, and Sergeant-Major Greb is his favorite fashion accessory— a rebuke, the beautiful Brother thinks, to hoity-toity fellow officers who disdain enlisted men and their vulgar religion. Michael comes from a long line of Army men, but even before the Crusade, his aim was to shake up the military, revitalize it, bring it new glory with himself in the lead. Now he has fashioned holy war from such common clay as Sergeant-Major Greb.

The Crusader commander works till he has achieved a fine sheen. He takes the mirror from Greb, angling it to best admire his own glowing skin. Young Crusaders begin to emerge yawning and scratching from the homes and shops they've occupied, to piss in the alley behind the church. The Sergeant-Major tosses a cigarette to the dirt and grinds it out, and drapes a towel over the boss. They head back to the police station they have commandeered.

The women from the fire follow with hot water. Wherever he goes, Brother Michael hauls with him the bronze baptismal font that he took last year from a Latin church, after using it to drown the Latin priest, thus liberating another district from heresy. Since the Crusaders blew up the main water line, the women have to haul water from the river a half-kilometer away. Sitting naked in his tub, Brother Michael soaps up as they pour the steaming buckets over his head and shoulders. Then he lies back, idly thumbing his comm.

Bit of a treat today. Doctor Sevik has forwarded a video from one of the Kingdom actions. That's what they call a raid. A mumbly voice accompanies the video, one of Sevik's killers, he has forgotten the name. Nice visuals: broken outline against the sky, dark shapes littering the foreground. What could it be? Camera moves closer: ahh! Bodies outside a bombed school. Camera moves inside. Now we see more detail— a palm-size fragment of scalp and skull, a hand in a worn glove resting gently on a windowsill, heaps of scorched children by a doorway. Heretics one and all. Brother Michael grips his erection. God is great! Decides not to finish, though. His business today might afford further blessings.

His entourage gathers while the Brother dries off and dresses. Humble servant that he is, Michael wears jeans and a leather jacket without insignia, except for the gold crucifix sewn over the left shoulder. He slips on the heavy steel ring given him by Doctor Sevik: a serpentine S writhing on a crucifix, the logo for Sevik's death squad, Submit to the Lord. The Sergeant Major and the local

commanders wait for their boss to emerge. Together, they head across the plaza to the to the ruins of the cinema.

The roof collapsed during the fighting, but the townspeople have cleared away debris and set up in front a semicircle of folding chairs facing the audience. Sunlight beams cheerily through the jagged remains of the ceiling, while lolly birds zip in and out of the rafters. Here convenes another session of the Sacred Circuit Court of the Lord, of which Brother Michael is the chief and only judge. He appears in the ornate doorway like an archangel in a blaze of light.

As any good commander must, Brother Michael spends a lot of time in the field. Not so much directing operations —burning villages is not that complicated, and his boys have had plenty of practice— as administering his domain: farming out fiefdoms, adjudicating disputes among grabby commanders, and eradicating the last traces of democracy in Crusader lands. As did kings of old, three times a year Brother Michael makes the circuit of the conquered territories, holding court in churches, town halls, and rich men's palaces.

The theater is packed, people milling at the front and in the aisles. Crusaders have come from miles around to see their general. Not many bring petitions or plaints, however; Michael's judgments are notoriously capricious, and invariably expensive. Thus his rough justice has practically eliminated crime in One True territory— leastwise, that anyone sees fit to mention. This town, however, has only recently joined the territory of the saved. Thus there are still disputes to be settled, mostly over how to divvy up the property of the dead and fled.

Also, it's an entertainment; the Brother always brings a new game or two to play. Not so fun for the players, perhaps, but amusing to the spectators.

The local priest introduces Brother Michael to the town notables— the mayor, the doctor, the petrolero, a handful of guys who own the best land. Brother Michael favors a two-handed grip as he greets each one: "Welcome to the work of the Lord. Bless you for coming." Then, arms wide, the Crusader commander embraces each of his new devotees. Back at Army HQ in Saray, some of his fellow officers reacted poorly to this creepy habit, but Michael finds it useful. All well and good to have a personal relationship with Jesus; Brother Michael wants you to know he thinks your relationship with Michael is very important, too.

At length, the warrior chief nods to Father Floriyan, who announces, "Let us pray!" The big shots face the crowd, hands over each other's shoulders, as all bow their heads.

"Sit by me!" Michael tells Captain Rahday, a bloated bruiser with bloodshot eyes, the Lion of Loshty Vot. Then Michael takes his seat in in the center of the semicircle. The assembly sits with a clatter, except for several dozen standing by the walls. These are Michael's bodyguard. He calls them his Archangels. (And who do Archangels serve?) The priest sits at Brother Michael's left. Sergeant Major Greb stands just behind, burly arms crossed.

Michael crosses one foot over the other. His chair is a little small, so his long legs stick out in front. Addressing the crowd, Michael proclaims, "We come to bring justice. Democracy hides behind the puny laws of prideful men. We follow the eternal laws of God." Michael reaches for the Bible from Floriyan's hands, raises it high. "We will chastise their disobedience. We will tear down their childish arrogance."

The priest jumps to his feet, hands in the air. "Will of God!" he shouts. He looks around.

Interrupted, Michael stares at him a moment, finally nods. "Yes, the will of God."

"Willa God!" the assembly roars. The good Father drops to his seat, blushing.

Michael opens the holy book, riffs through till he finds what he wants, and hands it to Father Floriyan. "Will you read the Book?"

Floriyan peers at the passage above Michael's thumb. "Jeremiah: 'Behold, the days come, says the Lord, when I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.'" The priest looks up; does he need to continue?

The new David takes back the book, flips the pages again, reads destruction: "The Book of Deuteronomy: 'For the Lord shall judge his people. I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal. I lift my hand to heaven," and here the Crusader lifts his fist and his voice. "If I whet my glittering sword, and my hand take hold on judgment, I will render vengeance to my enemies, and payback to those that hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood —drunk with blood!— and my sword shall devour flesh, with the blood of the slain and of the captives.'" Brother Michael pauses, looks around, and reads again: "'Rejoice, you nations, for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and will render vengeance to His adversaries, and mercy to his people.'" The Crusader snaps shut the book. "'Avenge the blood of His servants!' That's God's promise! 'And mercy to his people.' That's God's justice! Are you God's servants?"

"Praise God!" the assembly roars. "How great are Your works!"

"What do you think? Is it time to wash clean this Sodom of disobedience and unbelief?"

"Wash it clean!" the soldiers shout. "Praise God!" Then they are ready to begin.

● Breakfast with the Archbishop

About the same time, Archbishop Nagahry takes a late breakfast in the forecourt of a bombed-out mosque. Oranges, pistachios, and lamb stew cooked up by his very own mom. She is barely able to walk, but there she is, hobbling about the table with a big pot and ladle. What she won't do for her Sonny Boy. Oops! There goes a a big glob onto the Archbishop's tunic— shaky hands, poor dear. In company Nagahry is always gracious, generous. Dabbing at his sleeve, he tells her, "It's OK, ma, no harm done. Antun, give us a hand here." As the priest leads her away, Mom grins like a demented person, which she may or may not be.

Eddie Nagahry runs the religious side of the Crusade, and the relationship with their Kulkhizan patrons; Brother Michael commands the armed units. Naturally the Brother has his own ideas as to which is more important. But the Brotherhood of the Cross and Sword owe much of their early success to the Archbishop's blessing, which rebranded the conspiracy of disgruntled officers as the hand of God reshaping the world.

The Archbishop's guest today is a Mr. Totemish, a slender black man of uncertain provenance. He seems almost dainty among the rough soldiers of the Crusade, but not the slightest bit uncomfortable. In an inside pocket he carries a small ceramic chipper, undetectable at most airports. He has to use it now and then, when time does not permit subtler arrangements. Normally, though, he and his bosses prefer to outsource such work. For the most part Totemish relies on preparation, reputation and the weight of his message— most recently, updates to the codes to NATO stealth technology, bought from officer in Brussels. These allow Crusader missile crews to see through electronic chaff and bring down NATO warplanes when they get too close. In the early months of the war, airstrikes pushed back the Crusader advance. With these codes, Crusaders can easily bring down million-Euro planes with cheap truck-launch rockets. These days NATO fliers rarely venture beyond the Saray front.

Mr. Totemish represents Clear Sparkling of Shanghai, one of the four global water companies. Having gotten nowhere with Rudeny's new government, the company decided to throw in their lot with the Crusaders. All they want in return are the rights to the country's surface water. All of it.

Rudeny is poor as spit. But it has vast hydro potential— fat torrents pouring from the mountains on the Kulkhiz border. The price of water has exploded throughout the eastern Mediterranean, and the corporations are scrambling to lock up the supply. With a bit of engineering, Rudeny's abundant water resources could be diverted to more lucrative markets, a real coup for Clear Sparkling. But Nagahry has been coy. Before making any commitments, he figures he should invite a bid or two from the hydro giant's competitors. Hence the special attention from Mr. Totemish.

Nagahry is a smart guy, but he doesn't get out much. So he's a bit baffled by this Totemish character, who does not act like a courier. For one thing, Nagahry can't place the accent. It's very unusual for outsiders to speak Rudenyan so fluently, but the Archbishop can't figure out where Totemish learned it. The Archbishop, fond of gold rings and chains, doesn't understand that the understated elegance of Mr. Totemish' clothing is a kind of corporate livery, a display by his employers more than any expression of his own. Likewise, Totemish can chat all day about wine, or racing boats, this year's favorites for the World Cup, or the highlights of the season in Tanah Rata. He can muster polite enthusiasm or a dry sense of humor, as the occasion requires. He has the rare gift of making his hosts feel worldly and much admired. Even more: that they grace the lives of those who employ them.

All this is stock in trade. What Totemish will not talk about is himself or his work, except for what his employers want right this minute. And he usually gets it for them, one way or another. They are always hungry.

To be polite, the courier accepts a cup of the prized local brew, which smells and tastes the same as Turkish coffee, except that the Blessed Patriarch Ayufnayzha invented it centuries before the infidel set foot in these parts— hence the name, "coffee". The Archbishop keeps pushing his breakfast around, looking for an opening, waiting patiently for a sparkle or a glimmer, but his visitor is smooth and sleek and blank as the hull of a submarine emerging in starlight. Don't try to be cute, the black man seems to be saying, o so elliptically. Don't overplay your hand. He reminds the Archbishop that it's not only Clear Sparkling that has competitors.

Eventually they reach an understanding. The Archbishop needn't hesitate. In these uncertain times, the wise man is satisfied with the bird in hand. His new friends welcome Nagahry with open arms and purses. As Father Antun clears the table, Totemish hands over the data leaf, which is no more than a digital key to an encrypted cache in cyberspace, with a set number of accessions allowed.

"A pleasant conversation, Mr. Totemish. Perhaps you'd care to stick around for my little homily. The boys are about to do battle, and they'll need God's word as much as any rocket launcher."

"Of course. I look forward to it." He might as well; one of his ongoing tasks is to record as much sight and sound of his targets as possible. Already his employers have downloaded the full record of this morning's negotiation. Nagahry's security scanned him, of course, but did not find the clever device that has come to seem to Totemish almost like a second skin— literally. He's already got the Archbishop's DNA, and that from several of the Crusader commanders. Totemish doesn't know for sure what they do with the bioscans back in the corporate labs, but he can easily imagine a multitude of uses.

Father Antun returns with a long mirror he leans against the table, and the Archbishop's costume for this speech: dazzling white and green camo, gold straps on the shoulder, and high boots of burnt umber. Nagahry strips to his underwear, red and blue cowboys on rocking horses, and steals a glance at his visitor. Mr. Totemish seems perfectly at ease, hands in his lap, one leg crossed over the other.

The priest helps Nagahry zip on the camo. Then comes the sacred sash, black and gold with the embroidered leather panel pendant on the right: the symbolic Sword of Sankt Rudo. Nagahry has modified it to suit modern tastes, by sheathing a real blade in this spiritual scabbard.

"The silver crucifix, please," Nagahry tells his aide. "The two-kilo, I think." And soon the priest comes back holding the massive cross in both hands. Nagahry doesn't like to wear it for long, it bruises his sternum, but he thinks it's perfect for these special occasions. He asks Totemish to help him with the boots.

The courier smiles. "I think I won't, thanks."

I think I won't, thanks! Perfect! A man who knows what. Imperturbable. Impervious to Nagahry's little tricks. Tugging at his finery as he looks in the mirror, the Archbishop tries to think of some occasion he can find or engineer to cap with exactly those words, in exactly that tone. I think I won't, thanks. His hands flutter as if dismissing some impertinence with barely a thought. Not quite. He'll have to practice.

Antun comes in to fit him with a collar mike. Show time.

● Justice Roll Down Like

Back at the cinema at Loshty Vot, most of the cases are pretty routine. Brother Michael takes no more than a minute to decide the most heinous crime, the woman who got an abortion; for depriving her husband of another child's lifelong labor she is swiftly dispatched in the alley adjacent.

"Excuse me, Brother Michael," interjects Father Floriyan, as they take her away. "The woman claims it was a spontaneous abortion. Could it be possible her husband is mistaken? Or deliberately misleading, out of spite?"

"Always a possibility." Brother Michael smiles and squeezes the priest's elbow. "We can only judge within our poor human abilities, isn't it so? God alone knows the hearts of sinners. If she's innocent, she goes to heaven today."

Yorg's case is also a property dispute of sorts. Zimara's husband, not knowing she survived Blago's assault, has come all the way from Echmash to petition for redress at the Sacred Circuit Court. He brought along Father Narek, his parish priest, to talk for him and as a kind of insulation against the vagaries of Brother Michael's mood. If they succeed the petitioners will split the proceeds fifty-fifty.

After he hears the priest's pitch, Michael asks Yorg, "You say the dead woman belonged to you."

"That's right, Brother," Yorg bobs up and down, wringing his cap. "I was down in the flatlands with Captain Hayk's unit. They told me what happened when I got back. It's been very hard. Who will care for the farm when I'm away on Crusade?"

Michael join his hands as if in prayer and taps his fingertips. "Very troubling. One soldier of God interfering with the property of another. We can't have this. That's not what our struggle is all about, is it?"

"No, never!" The chorus affects horror at the very thought.

"Who would commit such an outrage?"

"We're sure it was a mistake," Father Narek assures him. "Sometimes in the course of a Kingdom action there is unintended damage."

"Who?" Michael insists.

"We can't be sure," Narek spreads his hands, palm up. "We have so many on Crusade now." He doesn't need to say it. Everyone knows which squad took Echmash.

Michael shrugs. "Easy enough for us to check the logs for that day." He looks around the hall. "Unless someone who knows about this can give us the information."

Blago has been standing in the back, chatting away with Sejad. Sejad says very little in return, because he sees Brother Michael watching them. Sejad digs an elbow into Blago's ribs. Blago straightens up, looks at his boss.

"Ah, Captain Blago. Do you have information about this?"

Blago looks around, trying to get his bearings. "Yes, Brother Michael. I was in Echmash that day. As I recall, there was a lot of disrespect, someone resisting lawful commands in wartime."

"And what happened to this person?"

"We took her to the hospital."

"The hospital. In Echmash?"

"No, Echmash doesn't have a hospital."

"I know that."

Blago blinks his eyes, thinking fast. "There's a clinic in Obeyyed. We left her there."

"She never came back," Father Narek offers.

Blago shakes his head. "These unfaithful women. It's shameful, really. But, Brother Yorg: maybe you're better off this way. I don't know how a real Crusader could permit such disobedience."

"So we're not going to find the corpse in a ditch somewhere? Body parts floating in the river?" Michael demands.

Sejad starts at the question. Blago studiously keeps his eyes on his commander. "Certainly not. Unless she wandered off and fell in there herself," he jokes, but no one laughs.

"So what do you want?," Michael asks the petitioners. "Are we looking at a crime? You want me to punish this sinner, is that it?"

"No, no," Narek replies before Yorg can open his mouth. "We have no quarrel with the Captain. I'm sure he was only doing his duty. As far as I'm concerned, no man can commit a crime while he is on Crusade." He raises his arms to the gaping roof. "We cannot sin when we keep our eyes on our Heavenly Father," he proclaims. "Am I right?" They all agree.

Narek swings an arm over Yorg's shoulders. "But here we have a One True, a stalwart of the Faith, and a brother in arms. It's been a very difficult time for this man. He's had to send the children to his sister. And now he has to pay a boy to take care of the livestock."

Yorg nods sorrowfully.

"Father Floriyan, what do you think? How can we resolve this difficult case?"

Floriyan tugs wisely at his beard. "It's true, with Captain Hayk off on Crusade, Captain Blago should have consulted with Father Narek. But then Brother Yorg would have had to punish this woman himself. In any case," he beams at Blago, "going on Crusade is penance enough. The sacrifice these young men make . . . . Perhaps, he could ask Brother Yorg to go with him on the next Kingdom action. Then Yorg could share in the results."

Yorg looks very unhappy. Hayk is hard enough to deal with. Yorg has no interest in taking orders from Blago.

Michael shakes his head. "And take Hayk's man from him? No doubt Hayk has his own actions planned. Brother Blago, are you willing to negotiate with Captain Hayk?"

"Brother Michael, that seems an unnecessary burden for my brother captain." Blago wants no part of it either; now Hayk can jack up the price.

"Perhaps you have another suggestion, then. Come now, it's one woman. Let's clear this matter."

"I certainly meant no disrespect to a soldier of Hayk's. Maybe in their zeal, a couple of my boys got careless. They should have talked to the priest, as you say. You can be sure I'll reprimand them." Blago glares at Sejad, who looks stonily ahead. It is ever a soldier's lot to take the blame for his commander's screw-ups, and Blago has been particularly free in sharing this bounty.

Yorg holds out an empty hand. "It's very expensive, Brother Michael." The priest pushes his hand down: too much.

"How much?" asks Michael.

"There is a butcher." Yorg hesitates.

"There's a Jew butcher," Father Narek continues. "He has been feeding Yorg's family for months, while Yorg was fighting for the Lord. Yorg owes him a lot of money."

"And perhaps the Crusade could pay back the Jew, is that it? Shall we help Brother Yorg out of his debts?" Michael lets his audience think for a minute. "I don't know, Brother Yorg. If we started rewarding men every time a woman dies, they'd be killing wives all over Rudeny." He raises a hand to stop the laughter. "Tell you what. Brother Blago is going to lend you his ax. No, he's going to give it to you. Go ahead, Brother Blago, give your ax to Brother Yorg."

"My ax?" Blago is startled. "Brother Michael, let me buy him a fine ax. With my apologies."

"No, I like that ax you carry. Your favorite, is it? I saw you put it in the corner. Show us." Very slowly, Blago picks up the ax. "That's it. Very nice. Now there, Brother Yorg, is a real blade. It has persuaded many an atheist, I hear. Go ahead, Yorg, try it."

Yorg walks over, lays hands on Blago's weapon. Before letting go of the ax, Blago tries to drill holes in Yorg's skull with his eyes, but all he produces is a thin curl of smoke. There's a leather strip around the handle and a silver crucifix inscribed on either side of the blade. Yorg makes a couple hesitant passes.

"Do you like it?"

"It's a good ax, Brother Michael."

"Good. So go kill the Jew. No Jew, no debt." The officers nod and smile. Their Solomon directs Narek to report back to him in a month. "I want to hear the results. And for your faithful efforts, Captain Blago is going to make a modest contribution to your church in Echmash. Isn't that right, Brother?"

"Of course, Brother." Blago nods.

"How much?" Michael wants to know.

Blago stares at the floor. "A thousand riyal?" he tries. He looks hopefully at his commander.

Brother Michael lets the bid linger a moment, then smiles and spreads his hands. "Praise God! Are we good? Everyone good?"

"Praise God!" says Yorg, and kneels to kiss the Cross and Sword ring on Brother Michael's hand.

"The will of God!" Michael concludes.

"Willa God!" The Crusaders echo. Yorg keeps his head down, to conceal his satisfaction. For sure he doesn't want to look at Blago.

● Eddie Inspires

The Archbishop's guards forge a path through the throng of soldiers gathered in a field at the edge of town. Several trucks and APCs idle at the side of the road, next to Nagahry's ride. The Archbishop travels in a minibus with comm, refrigerator, and toilet. There's also a set of fold-out steps that he can use to climb to the roof, and that's what he does, so the faithful can see him. Cables snake from field generators to a rooftop sound system. His techs have set up three-meter folding screens at either side of the field— the new broadband display fabric. Nagahry has always been an early adopter. "In this business," he tells Antun, "you got to stay one step ahead of the other bastards." And he's very pleased with the screens, even though they have to be angled away from the sunlight. Many more can see his face, feel his passion, hear through him the voice of God.

By his rental on the edge of the crowd, Mr. Totemish inserts tiny earphones and turns on the player in his pocket. His takes on an angelic expression as he lifts his face to the distant Voice of God, but it's Sufi drums he listens to.

Nagahry grips the railing on the top of the bus. "Blood of the Martyrs!" he begins.

"Blood of the Martyrs!" they call back. The sound rises and falls like the swell of the sea. They are happy to see him, and ready for war.

"We face a terrible enemy," Nagahry tells them.

> They spit on soldiers, husbands, families, tradition. They spit on God. They seduce and poison our women and children and turn them against us, against God Himself. Once we lived in harmony, brothers arm in arm, in the unity of the love of the Lord. We had no rich and poor, no tyrant and slave. Blessed Beloved Sankt Rudo, the holy Emperor Sagrady Srany, and a thousand churches and one hundred thousand holy monks, and herds stretching beyond the horizon and silos bursting with grain, and pious women at their looms whilst angel-faced children romped in golden fields.

Mighty Rudeny! We remember and weep. Four thousand years of betrayal have laid thee waste! Satan comes in many masks, and we have seen them all. Today his guise and his instruments are the democrats, with their votes, whores, schools, demonic science and obsession with Western shoes and hairstyles. They think they can question everything without tearing down their own house. They think they can shit on God's law and make their own laws instead. Yes! They suppose that man's puny agreements can replace God who rules for all eternity. Have you ever heard anything more insane?

O how the proud shall fall! These godless men, they say they are free, but make no mistake: they are enslaved to lies, license, mindless lust, their worldly lives steeped in sin and degradation, their addiction to the shit and come of this world in place of the eternal beauty and love of God. Infected by egotism, drunk with science, alienated from God's community and their own souls, spiritually homeless, uprooted by false knowledge and rotten with false desire —spurning the loving firm hand of the Lord— they are driven here and there by the ferocious gales of their fears and hungers. They chase shameless after money and love and esteem in the eyes of men, only to find that none of these things can fill their shriveled souls.

And they are so afraid. Where can I get money? Does the woman love me? How can I suck up to the boss? Can you imagine? These are their concerns. And how they fight each other for these cheap bits of colored glass! Son against father, brother against brother.

The Apostle tells us, 'They entice us by sensual passions of the flesh . . . . They promise freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption.'

And they are so afraid of dying. 'Please, please don't kill me,' they beg. You've heard them, I think. Yes? Of course! Cut off from eternal life in heaven, they count nothing so precious as their few moments on this foul dungheap of a planet. They have their noses shoved so far up the devil's arse they can't bear to live without the stench. 'Don't shoot!' they wail. 'I have children!'

The Archbishop waits a moment for the guys to have a good laugh.

They fear the bullet they won't even feel. They weep at the idea of losing this fetid sewer of worldly existence. What they should fear is eternal suffering in the fires of hell.

Have you ever seen a man in flames?— screaming and running till he sinks in agony into a charred heap, legs and elbows stuck out this way and that, with a charred mask for a face. Now think of all the nerves in your skin set on fire— not for a moment, or a day, not for a million days or a million years, but millions upon millions of millenia, longer than the life of this planet, longer than the sun will shine, and much, much hotter—

Eddie waves the holy book.

'That man will drink the wine of God's wrath . . . he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.'

We will save them. We will free these wretched cringing savage slaves. There is only one true freedom: obedience to our Father. Our crusade is to free these slaves from their pitiful lusts so that at last they can partake in eternal life and love.

"We bring liberation!" thunders Nagahry.
"To those oppressed by sin," respond the troops.
"We bring peace!"
". . . to those tormented by doubt!"
Four hundred chant:

> We bring salvation to those in chains,
> order to chaos,
> understanding to the confused,
> hope to the fearful,
> wholeness to the broken,
> shining purity to the unclean.
>
> We bring the calm of obedience, and
> the joy of eternal union with our Father.
>
> We bring comfort to those in anguish at their separation from God's love.
> We bring the justice of perfect harmony with God's eternal law.
>
> We bring a Shepherd to the helpless,
> a Way to the lost,
> meaning to the aimless,
> rebirth to the dying,
> the Father to His children.

"Yes, that's the promise," Nagahry continues. "That's what we fight for."

> So here is what I want to know. Today, as you go into battle, men and boys, beloved sons of the One True God, this is my question: Have you got the spiritual toughness to do the job?
>
> Anyone can pull a trigger. A baby can pull a trigger— I know, I had my son shooting as soon as he could pick up a pistol. But can you go to your own village and kill your neighbors when they rat us out to the democrats? Can you shove a gun in your sister's mouth when you see she's been whoring around with heretics? Our Lord tells us, 'If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.' So I ask you: are you tough enough for this job?
>
> Christ was tough. He had to be. He grew up in a world of unimaginable chaos and cruelty, pagans and heretics, whores and homosexuals. People did whatever they wanted, and the foul breath of the western empire filled every home with disease, disorder and doubt, where even His own people turned their backs on the Word of God. Here they had the Son of God walking among them, bringing peace and order to the world they had poisoned, and what did they do? They flogged the skin from His back and nailed Him to the Cross. But He rose again in glory.

What I would give to walk in the Holy Land in those holy days! What I would give to walk in the footsteps of our Lord God! To see the living God with my own eyes, even if only a glimpse across a crowded field. What a blessed sight!

He'd be a tall man, strong, and young, remember, young like you, striding across the field, his broad shoulders set, his long locks trailing, infused with divine purpose, and the apostles arrayed behind like a flying squad. The crowd parts before them with awe.

They murdered Him— the Jews, the Romans. After all God had done for them, all His love and favor, they betrayed Him, and betray Him now. They murdered his only begotten Son— beaten, crucified, the lance in his side and a crown of thorns piercing His brow. But He rose again in glory! I tell you this.

Christ was tough, tougher than the nails they hammered into His hands and feet. He gave his life for us and rose again in glory. 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' Everlasting life! So you see, you can't die in battle. O, they can kill your body— that weak, whining, corruption, that prison of fear and desire. But if you fall in the work of the Lord, you will live forever. Your true and divine self, the pure spirit united with our Father.

Christ rose again in glory, and he is with us today. Yes He is. He is here right now. Can you see Him? Can you see His outstretched arms and torn hands? He is here to welcome you into the Kingdom for ever and ever. And as you march against the heretics and the infidels, the traitors and apostates, as you march arm in arm with your brothers in Christ, you remember our heavenly Commander. And when you hear the order, "Forward!", it is not my voice, nor Captain Blago's, nor Captain Hayk's. We are but the vessels. I want you to hear our Lord's true voice, speaking to your heart and soul. Our Lord who promises us a new Kingdom on Earth and everlasting life with Him in Heaven. 'For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.' Do you hear His voice?

Can you hear Him?

Four hundred boys and young men wave machetes, machineguns, RPGs. "Praise God!"

The Archbishop raises the machinegun Father Antun has thoughtfully put in his hand and sprays the inoffensive sky. "Blood of the Martyrs!"

Crusaders yell, "The will of God!" and run to the trucks, as they'd rehearsed, and take off in a cloud of dust for the next town to be washed clean.

Weeks later, survivors begin to trickle into New Start camp.

● Late Lunch

The girls don't finish mopping and scrubbing till early afternoon. They are very hungry, but the routine is to go to the showers first. Then they can go to the refectory.

By the time they get there, the food is mostly gone, so there's an unseemly hustle to cut in line. Taline has very sharp elbows, and clears a slot for Yesenya. "Slow poke. Move ass or go hungry." The girls complain about the food. It was better a few months ago. They don't realize that, having raked over the border districts so thoroughly, the Crusaders are running out of meat and grain.

No stranger to hunger, Yesenya chews her bread slowly as Filipa taught her. And as she lifts her eyes, she almost forgets her guts. Above, all around, ornate pillars and vaulting, glorious handcarved screens, candelabras swinging ever so slightly to the rotation of the Earth, a thousand years of beauty from the minds and hands of anonymous God-struck geniuses.

And along one windowless wall, maps of all kinds. At first it's the wild swirls and colors that fascinate the girl. But in succeeding days, as she contrives to sit beneath them every afternoon, she realizes the maps show the layout for the monastery itself, and Hidris, and the roads and paths crossing the mountain from Kulkhiz to Rudeny. There are little stick-on symbols for vehicles and radio towers and other spiky icons she doesn't recognize, and some of these change from day to day. The Crusaders use the dining hall for their evening situation reports, and, as there are none but the Faithful in these walls, don't bother to take them down at night. Zimara has taught her the alphabet, and as she idly sounds out the letters, Yesenya is astonished and delighted to recognize some of the words. In a far corner of the biggest map, she sees the name of Echmash.

"What's the matter?" Taline asks, from across the table. Yesenya just shakes her head, brushing away a tear. She has conceived the very first edge of an idea in her mind, and she needs to tug on it, draw it out, before she talks to anyone. Taline, insatiably curious, looks at the map and back to Yesenya. Taline can't read, but figures she'll worm the secret from Yesenya sooner or later.

After lunch Goranka sends them out on a score of jobs— washing clothes or trucks or cookpots, hauling trash, stoking furnaces, plastering holes, painting mildewed corridors, answering whatever calls for help come in from maintenance staff all over the complex.

There are soldiers everywhere, occasionally in desultory drill, but mostly in corners smoking ganja, or sprawled against stone walls, game boxes in their laps. For boys fresh off sixteen hour workdays in shops and farms, Crusade is a kind of ecstasy of indolence. Bored? Not these laddies. Stupefaction is their preferred state, and they are amply supplied with the means to achieve it— from screen games to pharmaceuticals to all night hymns to the Almighty. It's only after the first few months on Crusade that they begin to look forward to the rapture of rape and mass murder. They scarcely glance at the passing girls and women, waddling bundles of scarves, boots, coats, mops and buckets. The boys have got comelier curves on their screens.

"Get back to the courtyard at five. I'll be watching you," Goranka growls, but does not. Yesenya learns that Goranka has her own mysterious purposes and pasttimes.

"Come back at three," Nika whispers.

"What?"

"Ennate Ora. You'll hear the monks." Then they all split up.

● Exemplary

The Sacred Circuit Court resumes after a gluttons' lunch, courtesy of Loshty Vot's richest surviving landowner. He is anxious to please. Bellies bulging, sucking cigars, Michael and his officers stroll back to the cinema.

The afternoon is devoted to disciplinary cases. There's a priest who let the government set up a clinic in his village. Greb escorts him to the alley. There's an old man, born into the true faith, who converted forty years ago to one of the bible-thumping sects. Wrong Bible. Out he goes to the alley, while his accusers squabble over what's left of his farm. Greb drags in a couple of deserters, weeping, begging for their lives. Those cases don't take long.

After each decision, the Crusader leader proclaims, "The Will of God!"

"Willa God!" the assembly answers. "How great are Your works!"

Stealing is another serious crime— unauthorized stealing, that is, robbery in which the boys don't share the proceeds with their captains. The Crusader leadership takes a very dim view of this sort of private enterprise. They consider it almost as great a threat as desertion, perhaps because, in the aftermath of a raid, it's fairly easy to do. The boys pocket electronics and jewelry and don't report them to the captains. At night they load up trucks with merchandise or furniture, then burn down the looted shops and homes. They drive off with cars and motorbikes before the captains can inventory them. They kidnap landowners and torture them until their families wire credits to the basement banks in Hidris.

All this cuts into the revenue flow to Brother Michael and his captains. It undermines their business model. They do their best to discourage it.

Today Captain Rahday accuses Brother Toob of stealing some pigs, and selling them, and blowing the money on a four-day binge in Hidris with his pals. Brother Michael is determined to make an example. But a pudgy man in a suit asks permission to speak.

"If I might, Brother Michael. First, I have to say how disgusted I am that Brother Toob took so long to make his contribution . . . ."

Rahday interrupts. "He didn't make it at all. He's a thief, pure and simple."

"And he's very ashamed, as he should be. A pitiful excuse for a man." The pudge points to the beefy, bruised, unshaven peasant standing between two of Greb's thugs. Toob hangs his head, but the spread of legs and shoulders radiates defiance. A long drool of spit and blood hangs from his mouth. "Even so, I'm told, he has been a faithful warrior. He took part in the siege of Lukatsluka, and helped blow up the train in Marm. He lost three fingers at Kavkaz. Show us your hand, Toob." With a kind of a grin, exposing bloody lips and stumps of teeth, the prisoner raises ziptied hands, waggles a thumb and forefinger. "So I ask you to consider a suitable punishment for this sinner, in the light of his service and sacrifice."

"Who are you?" demands Brother Michael.

"I'm sorry, Brother, I'm Engineer Mooyich."

"And why am I listening to you?"

"I am embarrassed to say, this pathetic example of soldiery happens to be my brother-in-law."

"I see. So a woman sent you here."

"Not at all, Brother. I'm sure you understand, my duty to the family . . . ."

"Tell me, Engineer. Did Jesus say, Choose your woman over the Word of God? Did He say, Family comes first, and after that you can worry about eternal salvation?"

"No, Brother. Our Heavenly Father comes first, of course."

"'No, Brother,'" Michael mimics, scornfully. "Our Lord said, Leave your family and follow me. Abraham was ready to butcher his son for God. And here you are, defending this thief to please your wife?"

Engineer Mooyich sees that this is not working out at all, and darts like a rabbit for the nearest burrow. "Please, I wasn't being clear. This man owes me money." That draws hoots from the crowd.

"Seems we share a problem," says Michael, to more laughter.

"Yes, Toob is a soul-stained sinner. But I ask you not to shoot him. Let him live to make amends, to the Crusade as well as to myself."

"So generous!"

Hastily Mooyich amends, "Of course, I defer my debt to you. The Crusade must come first."

Michael says to Rahday. "Yes, let's let him go. He stole from God, but we don't want to do anything too hurtful. Perhaps ten Haily Marys?" He turns again to look at the petitioner. "Brother Mooyich, are you sure you know where you are? If you're looking for reconciliation, Saray is that way. Here we don't beg forgiveness from sinners. Rather, they beg forgiveness from God." More clamor from the listeners.

Mooyich slaps his forehead. "What am I thinking? What profits it a man, and so forth. I forego the debt, one hundred percent. Let Toob pay to the Crusade what he owes me."

"But of course the prisoner has no money. I don't know. He comes here with empty hands, you come with empty hands. Is this how you repay our Lord, who came to us with nails in his hands?"

"But just yesterday I, um, I talked with Captain Rahday!"

"Now my captain is responsible for your debts? Is that what you're telling me?"

Engineer Mooyich is shocked at the price, but he's got no choice now. "The captain has many responsibilities already. I don't want to add to his burdens in any way. I mean only to say, there must have been a mix-up, entirely my mistake. If you will permit, I can go to my home and come back right away with an offering."

Brother Michael shrugs, as if it's all the same to him. "As you wish. In fact, let me help you. Sergeant Major, please assign a car for our guest here. No need for him to walk all that way. But bide a moment, I think we can settle this matter with your poor wife's brother." Curious, naturally, despite himself, the prisoner raises his head, bloody chin out.

Michael turns to the priest. "Father, in all your years, have you ever come upon such a villain?"

"Never." Father Floriyan shakes his head mournfully.

"Tell me, how can we respond to such betrayal?"

"Brother, if I might suggest, of course you have to shoot him." Toob flinches as if shot already.

"And you?" Michael tips his head to Rahday and the other officers. "You want me to shoot him too?" They nod; Rahday waves a hand as if to say, Get it over with. For sure he'd like to shoot that busybody Mooyich. Now he's going to have to kick Mooyich's bribe upstairs.

Michael often requires his officers to declare themselves like this. That way his decision is only the generous granting of their desires. Once in a while he plays the magnanimous father, and lets the sinner go free. For their part, the Crusader captains may never demand less than the harshest penalty. They will never be able to desert, because their names are on too many murders. And, just in case Toob has a vengeful son or brother, they'll go after Rahday first, not Michael.

"Brother Toob," says Michael."You are fortunate indeed to have such a loving family. Tell me, do you keep up with your Bible?" The prisoner stares at him. "Good, perhaps you are familiar with the parable of the two debtors." He gestures for the book, which the priest passes on, and opens it. "Yes, Luke.'There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred riyal, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most? Simon answered, I suppose he to whom he forgave most. And Jesus said unto him, You have judged rightly.' Now, I know how much you stole from God's Crusade. I don't know how much you stole from your brother-in-law."

"Borrowed only," says the prisoner, and licks cracked lips. "I mean to repay."

"He'll pay with interest, Brother Michael," Mooyich interjects. "Twenty percent. . . . fifty!" He is appalled. He never did like Toob.

Michael ignores the bargaining. "Jesus says the good creditor forgave both debtors. Now here you have two creditors. Plus your sister, who is pleading for your worthless life. Which one is the sister?"

A shabby woman with big dirty hands shuffles out of the crowd, to stand next to Mooyich.

"So tell me, Brother Toob: If we forgive you, which one of us will you love the most?"

"You, Brother Michael. I love you the most," says Toob through broken teeth.

Michael looks disappointed. "But that's not right. We are poor mortal men. Put not your faith in the things of this world. You must love the Lord above all." He nods to the guards.

As his fellows drag Toob away, he protests, "I love God first!" Toob gets one arm loose for a second, and in reply a quick elbow to the face. Ferociously he shouts, "I love God first!"

"Splendid! In a moment you can tell Him yourself!" Then Toob is out the door.

Michael waves a hand at the brother-in-law, who stands there aghast. "Come to me, Engineer. Closer. Here, in recognition of your sacrifice." The Crusader general hands Mooyich his own pistol,

handle first. The engineer stands there, bewildered. “Come now, don’t hesitate. I’m afraid I can’t be as generous as Captain Blago, that’s only a loan. Who knows, I may need to use it again later.” This gets a dutiful guffaw from his fans— they have heard this joke before. “But God has given you a much greater gift: the chance to restore your family’s honor. To get straight with the Lord.” The man gapes at the gun in his hand. The soldiers start to giggle.

Brother Michael leans back. “But maybe you don’t appreciate His offer.” Ever the catechist, he asks, “What do you think, my brothers in Christ? Shall we let this man forsake his duty, just this once? What would Jesus do?”

Brother Michael nods to his left. “Corporal Nudzh. Tell us. What does the Prophet say?”

Nudzh knows this one. They all do. “Jeremiah, Brother Michael. ‘Cursed be he that fakes the work of the Lord, and cursed be he that holds back his sword from blood.’”

“Curses! We don’t like curses!” Michael shakes his head. “So you see, Brother Mooyich, God is pretty clear about what He wants from us. No need to be afraid. We are nothing more than His instruments.”

“Willa God!” shout the Crusaders.

“Indeed, it’s the will of God.”

The man with the gun looks around, dazed, until his wife pulls him away. After a nod from Brother Michael, Sergeant Major Greb saunters after them.

Behind the church they have to pick their way among the bodies. The stones in the alley are slick with blood and piss.

“I can’t do it, I can’t!” Mooyich shakes his head, but his wife knows better. She won’t lose both husband and brother in the same day. She takes his hand to steady it.

Toob sags against the church wall. "What a bitch, Mina! I’m your father’s son!” He starts to cry.

“Fat lot you care about us! You brought us to this. Selfish prick!”

“Go ahead then. Kill your own flesh and blood!” Toob knuckles away the tears.

“Shut up!” she shouts. “Take your hands out of your face!”

Greb’s squad erupts in laughter.

“Mooyich,” Toob starts to say, but Mina raises her husband’s hand and presses it hard against the pistol. The first bullet catches Toob in the shoulder and spins him around. He drops, squealing. The soldiers roar and slap their thighs. Furious, she snatches the gun into her own hands and walks to her sobbing brother. She used to feed him chocolate peanuts, long ago.

“Sorry, Mina,” says Toob, looking up at her, and shuts tight his eyes like a child promised a prize.

“Always sorry, Toob.” She drills him through the bridge of the nose and flings Michael’s handgun down the alley. It skitters among the corpses like a cockroach. Then she drags her husband away. “You’ll get your God-damned money,” she hisses over her shoulder. She stumbles over a dead woman; tears stream down her face.

To one side, Sergeant Major Greb spits on the ground and slots another cigarette into his mouth. He takes a hit, and, exhaling, cocks his chin in the direction of Michael’s gun. Corporal Nudzh scoops it up and wipes it clean with his sleeve.

● Sky Land

The monks sing somewhere as the girls gather again in the Court of the Martyrs, so-called because of the stone sculptures adorning the arcade— haloed men in various stages of dismemberment. Their bodies twist in all directions whilst pupil-less eyes screw heavenward.

Nika and Taline carry bulging backpacks. Vlasta, of course, has got her sleepy infant brother.

“Where are we going?” Yesenya asks.

“Look up,” Vlasta nods.

Walls, columns, towers, flags, stone warriors, saints and dragons, the crumpled shell of a distant dome . . . .

"Hawks."

"Kites. Our kites," says Nika. "Come on."

They lead Yesenya through gates and shadowed alleys to the Plaza of Prince Paltasar, across from the ruined church he built a thousand years ago. Padlocked gates bar the cavernous front entrance— the original, exquisitely carved oak doors now adorn some Russian oligarch's casino in the Crimea. Overhead, the great dome gapes where some mountain titan took a bite.

The Crusaders have strewn trash across the plaza. The girls clamber carefully over broken satellite dishes, garden tools, blades and rotors from the workshops, crumpled wheelbarrows, piles of bricks and tin cans, rusty rolls of fencing, and a tangle of pulleys and frayed ropes, to reach a wobbly cart loaded with a stripped engine. Taline stops and turns to Yesenya.

"You can never tell about this place."

Yesenya crosses herself. "Mother Mary, strike me dead if I tell."

The wheels screech as the the girls push the cart to one side. There's an iron trap, padlocked on one side, set into the cobbles by the wall of the church. Taline takes out a screwdriver and kneels to pry around the hinges. Narrow stairs lead below the church. Taline looks around, then gestures the girls into the dark. She follows them in, replacing the trap over her. They follow the service passage under the narthex, climb a set of stone stairs, skewed under under the weight of centuries, and then a series of iron rungs bolted into the wall. Yesenya hesitates. Vlasta, ahead of her, looks down without a word, then continues climbing, Emrush swaying gently on her back. Yesenya follows, holding tight. A distant clanking, and then Nika's out, and then Vlasta.

A deep blue shows through the opening above, almost purple. Taline tugs on Yesenya's ankle from below. "You have to be quiet. No one can know we're here." Yesenya nods. Then she's outside.

Wind, the crackle of blue tarps, the sun-splashed glare of the dome stretching into space. Much of the masonry has been exposed, but brilliant turquoise tilework still covers curving hectares. Yesenya spreads her arms. She can feel the heat coming off the surface. She turns and runs to the parapet. Standing on tiptoe, she drapes her arms over the top of the wall. Off to one side she can see the road through Hidris. Forests stretch away below, all the way to Rudeny plateau, almost all the way to Echmash. Sun glints on a patch of waterfall launching from the mountain. Yesenya feels lightheaded, almost breathless. Her vision narrows and reaches out, far far. Just below, riding the updrafts, black kites soar and slide like skaters. They nest in the escarpment below, or higher up, just inside the broken dome.

Someone says, "Yesenya Hedrosik. We welcome you to Sky Land. Do you like it?"

Someone asks, "Yesenya. Are you OK?"

She's weeping, but she's OK. "I want to fly."

Sky Land! Prince Paltasar built the old church on one horn of the limestone saddle at the very edge of the monastery. Since the quake of '63 —1763, that is— the monks use it only for storage. Except for the radio tower, it's the highest point in the complex. The girls are further shielded from view by the high facade in front. They can look down on the modern church and the barracks and workshops and the embroidery of arcades and terrace walls. They can see into the Tower of Penance, where sometimes they watch a balding man at a desk in headphones waving his arms to music they cannot hear.

Beyond the walls, Hidris town is not so pretty. The Crusaders have set up a fuel dump just below East Gate: squat massive cylinders and a fleet of trucks enclosed by a razor-wire fence. A hundred meters further on, crumbling pavement marks the lip of the drop-off. This is where the townspeople

dump their garbage in a pustulent streak down the mountainside. When the wind turns it carries the stench even to Sky Land.

The girls stand between parapets and the drum of the dome. Four shallow half-domes divide the space. The tarred surface tilts slightly to the drains running the inside edge of the parapet. Here and there a puff of bone and feather; otherwise the kites keep the pigeons away. Instead, bits of brick and tile litter the space, and in each quadrant the lonely thrust of a vent pipe. In places, the girls have gathered the tiles into weird little mounds, stuck with bits of glass and prayer beads and the plastic saints' figurines that they find everywhere in this pilgrimage town; shrines of a childish paganism. When it storms they climb down to a narrow landing just below the shattered dome, and watch sheets of rain sweep past.

"Help me with this," Taline directs, and she and Yesenya pull a stolen tarp from the older girl's pack. They set up a lean-to anchored with bricks, like the other girls have. Nika looks it over, then nods judiciously. She shows Yesenya how to raise one side when she has guests.

"Guests?"

"Of course. You can be my guest."

They follow Nika around the dome. "This is Waterfall," she explains. "Don't you see how my roof is a waterfall?" The tarp is blue and rattles in the wind, like all the others. It takes some squinting to see the cascade. "What's the name of your country?" she asks Yesenya.

"I don't know. Wind. No, Breeze."

"Warm Breeze," Taline decides.

"Yes, Warm Breeze."

"And you will be the Prince of Warm Breeze."

Yesenya flushes with pleasure. She has never been a prince before. She bows deeply. "And who do I have the honor?"

"Queen of Sea and Sky," Taline bows low, one hand sweeping past her knees.

"Archimendrite of Waterfall."

"Of course."

"President of Peninsula, pleased to meet you. And this is Kite Lord. Aren't you, Emrush?" Vlasta bounces the baby on her hip. The little boy squeaks and gurgles. "Emrush says he's hungry." He speaks a language only Vlasta can understand.

Nika's brought food. They squat under her waterfall and share it out— bread and cheese, bottles of pop, candy bars stolen from the Crusaders' barracks. (This causes no end of strife among the soldiers of Christ.) Vlasta fetches a tin of crackers with a jar of jelly, and water for Emrush. Nika has plastic plates and spoons for them all. Taline produces three candles in tin cans —"You must find another and bring it tomorrow," she tells the new girl— and lights them. This is as much fire as they dare, lest someone see the smoke. They clasp hands and chant their prayer to the Kite Mothers. The Queen of Sea and Sky breaks a piece of cheese and tosses it to the rim of the dome, for the kites. Then they sit and eat.

As they eat and sip soda, Nika passes around her treasures for comment and admiration: a stuffed animal of indeterminate genus; a magazine photo of some boy with a microphone, his pink hair molded into a dizzying twist like the tip of an ice cream cone; a broken box with a screen, leaking polycarbon entrails; a sketch of a smiling woman, her hair loose, quite well done but faded now, on lined notepaper.

"Have you more paper?" Yesenya asks. Nika has, and pencils, too. The others watch as Yesenya marks out an elaborate pattern, pausing often with the pencil to her lips. Then she nods and passes it around.

"What is it?" They can't figure it out. They give it back to Yesenya, who scrawls four letters in the center; she doesn't know how to spell the words.

"O ho!" Taline exclaims with delight, and passes it on to Vlasta and Nika, who hold it between them. Taline points to B and P and S and W. "Letters, right? What does this one say?"

"W says Wuh,"Yesenya recites. W for . . . ."

"Waterfall, yes? And this one?"

"P."

"Peninsula!" Vlasta gets it, too.

"And you see the domes, and the walls, and the plaza . . . this is Sky Land," Taline realizes. "This is us!"

Indeed it is, the very first map of Sky Land, by that intrepid explorer Yesenya Hedrosik, age eleven.

They jump rope. They page through pictures in magazines salvaged from the trash. Vlasta shows Yesenya the toilet— a bottomless bucket perched over a storm drain in the corner. They have placed several buckets around it to catch the rain, with bricks in the bottom to make sure they don't get loose in the wind. Among these, cups and buckets with dirt and shit and flowers sprawl gaily in the sun.

They have piled another mound of bricks just below the great gash in the central dome. Yesenya stands on tiptoe to peer inside, but already it's too dark to see the mosaic floor far below; nor can she hear the splash of her spit.

The sun drops fast toward Rudeny, and Echmash. Just beyond Yesenya's outstretched fingers, serrate blood blades of cloud slash the dark void above. The girls wrap up the food and sweep away the crumbs. Yesenya takes off running around the domes, arms spread, flying. The other girls follow, soaring raptors, quiet except for heavy breathing. They stop at the trap, and, one by one, drop into the dark.

● Home for the Holidays

Miryam gets the story from Arasely, and relays it to Avbury: "The woman you asked about, Zimara, she was trying to protect her cousin. Evidently her family had promised this little girl to one of the Crusaders. A gang of them came to get her, and Zimara got in their way. So they slashed her and dumped her in the river."

"There's a husband?"

Getting the refugees back home is a priority for New Start. Often the camp has to house families for weeks or months while fighting rages in their towns and villages. But every season the war erupts in new areas, and almost every week scores or hundreds more women and children show up at the gates. So it's important to encourage healthy residents to go home whenever it's safe enough to do so.

This is not so easy in practice. Even where the fighting has stopped for the time being, the land crawls with poorly controlled soldiers, deserters, and criminal gangs. Often the traditional authorities are little more than gangsters themselves.

So before they initiate contact among family members, NSC staff prefer to wait till they can get someone on the spot to assess the situation. This task usually falls to Miryam, the translator, who has over several months developed a network of friends and family of the refugees from all over the country. The savagery of the attack on Zimara makes Miryam extra cautious. Both the government and the Crusaders monitor all the comm traffic, and she'd just as soon not broadcast that Zimara is still alive.

"Right. We're trying to reach him. We've got another family here set to go back to Echmash next week. That's Zimara's village. We'll send a clean comm with them."

Several of the NGOs use a black hole in Cyprus for their most sensitive communications. No way to be sure, but it's probably snaky enough to evade the limited capabilities of the Crusaders, or Rudeny's government, for that matter. Expensive, but like the armies they clean up after, the front-lines agencies must have their black budgets.

"OK, thanks," the doctor waves her off. If she gave a second thought to any of the atrocities she hears about every day, she'd get nothing done.

● A Shadowed Ancient Land

Sometimes they are the Sky Land Explorers' Club, after the characters in a screen game their brothers and fathers like. The stolen girls remake in their imaginations this gutted old church. A collapsed wall becomes a waterfall, avalanche, or pyramid. Passageways become dungeons, caverns, entrances to a lost world. They locate the science lab or their secret headquarters beneath a sagging stairway, itself the ruins of an old temple drowned in even more ancient jungle. They fashion a starship from rusty folding chairs and an old steering wheel. Ascending from basement to dome they traverse the cosmos from hell to heaven.

Some of these spaces are dangerous— torn metal, shaky stonework, litters of glass below sky-spanning windows. But the play of light and dark on these broken and mysterious masses draws the Skylanders far from the toilets and fear and casual brutality of their life with the Crusade.

Other people live here, too, shy natives of these strange lands. They are hard to see but if you listen closely, you can hear them whispering. The girls study them for hours from high places, learn their languages and secret rituals. Then they convene under the dome, to compare notes and analyze their findings. Taline is President of the Sky Land Explorers' Club, and Yesenya has been elected mapmaker. As delicious as the exploration itself is the debate about where to go next: Africa? The desert? The planet Far Aldebaran?

● Yorg Dithers

It takes a while to get a message to Zimara's husband Yorg. He is less than thrilled to get the news. With his newly stolen wealth he's already in negotiation for a new wife. More worrisome, if Zimara returns she makes it look like he lied to Brother Michael, and embarrassed Blago for no good reason. The Captain is not someone to cross. Yorg's first thought is, No one must know.

Zimara was a stubborn woman, he remembers, and a disrespectful wife. Still and all, he kind of liked her. She took care of the farm. She made him a new jacket every year, finely embroidered in blue and gold. She saw the children through illness and accident. She teased her husband with crude remarks, and laughed loud when he paid her back in kind. Yorg was sad when he thought she was dead.

Yorg dithers for weeks. Maybe Blago will fall off the face of the earth.

● Damyana Helps

It takes many days for the infection to subside. One night, thrashing in delirium, Zimara falls from her bed before Arasely can get her arms around her. Now it's hard to lift Zimara without hurting her. "Help us!" Arasely appeals to the other women. They have been watching, but now cast down their eyes. Terrible things brought them to this camp. What happened to Zimara was worse, and they don't want to be contaminated.

"It's OK," Zimara says, panting. "They're just afraid."

"I'll keep asking," Arasely responds, loudly, looking around at the others, one by one. "We have to keep giving them a chance to save themselves."

A woman named Damyana gets up to help. For years she lived in Semsenkir, a mountain away from Echmash. Many a time she has dined on stolen Echmash chickens. Together, she and Arasely get Zimara back onto her cot.

● GPS

Sunday at Rudomil the new girls line up for their fitting. The faithful have gone tech in this country, stapling little GPS devices into their women's earlobes— keep the Missus from straying from her breathtakingly attractive husband. They call them Love Forevers. You can cut off the GPS, if you cut off half the ear; and then you can't go home. A few women tried, anyway, early on. They might run off to the town, or to their father's village. But they are easy to spot, and become targets for your common rapist. Now most women in Crusader territory wear the trackers under scarves doubly folded; makes the devices hard to see, and hard to see if you've cut yours off.

"We've all got them," Vlasta reassures Yesenya. "It doesn't hurt," she adds, but does not seem very sure. She fingers the insectoid burrowed in her own earlobe, perhaps recalling a time she was a child.

"Don't be a baby," Taline orders, and shows Yesenya where to sit. Goranka uses a punch tool, and hands Yesenya a rag to mop the blood. "Nothing to it," says Goranka. All Yesenya's been through, it hardly hurts at all. Then Goranka swabs on the alcohol, making Yesenya jump a bit. She keeps her eyes on the Skylanders, trying not to blink lest she spill tears, but does not make a sound. The Skylanders nod, very slightly.

Lately some jewelry shops have started to offer "matches"— snap-on ornaments to decorate the trackers, matched to an earring for the other ear. Just last month Berlusconi's fashion flagship caught on to the trend, and did a ten-page spread with naked women in golden chains modeling the fanciest; "Servile Style," they called it, and predicted a sweeping vogue among EU fashion pioneers.

There's also a growing back-room trade in blankers, devices that will kill the signal. They are too expensive for most women to buy, but if they can find the right comm shop, they can pay to kill their GPS. This way they can still walk in public with no visual clues that they have freed themselves. Once hubby loses the signal, though, the women can't turn it back on; in which case, too, they can't go home.

But Yesenya lives in a barracks and works inside high walls. Once she's got the tracker, no one pays her much attention. They can find her when they need her. Otherwise, it's "Stay out of my way," as Goranka advised. Most days Yesenya finds it easy to steal an hour or two with the Skylanders.

● Slush Fund

Zimara is sitting up in her cot when Avbury stops by. Half her head is packed in thick bandage, blood and puss caked at the edges. Her dark eyes burn. Arasely is with her.

"You know Arasely, I think, Doctor," says Miryam. "She and Zimara come from the same community."

Avbury nods. "Of course." Arasely stands, and shyly offers her hand. "You came after the fighting in February," Avbury continues. "Three kids at home, I think. Any word from your family?"

"My brother. He thinks my husband is almost ready."

Avbury nods. "Anything you need, Miryam can help you. Do you mind if I spend a moment with Zimara?"

The doctor has picked up a few Rudeny phrases. She sits next to the cot and takes Zimara's hand. "We reached your husband. Yorg, isn't it? Your kids are OK. He doesn't want to talk to you." Zimara waits. "That's standard, don't worry about it. They are terrified. Soon he'll tire of doing all the farmwork." Miryam repeats it all, more accurately, to be sure Zimara understands.

Zimara clears her throat. Her voice is still very weak. "Something else. They took my cousin."

Avbury leans back. "Cousin?" She looks at Miryam.

"The cousin the Crusaders took." Miryam taps her left cheek.

"Yes, you told me. Zimara, I don't know if we can help with that. There's been no crime."

Zimara shakes her head. "A great crime. This boy is stupid. He will hurt her."

"When your husband took you, how old were you?"

Zimara blinks her eyes. "Twelve."

Avbury nods. "Yes, as with thousands more. Look. We're outsiders. It's a terrible situation but we can't fix everything."

"You have money."

The doctor sighs. It's almost the first thing the women hear when they get to New Start Camp: rich Westerners to the rescue. It's true in part. Avbury has a modest off-the-books slush fund, replenished now and again by discreet donors in the rich countries. She needs it to cover the myriad expenses of operating in a war zone, costs that agencies can't have on their books. For instance, there are a hundred grand and petty gatekeepers with their hands out, controlling supplies and traffic to the camp. She's got the costs of shielding comm from all the nosy parkers out there, hijackers and kidnappers and cops, and politicians who'd be happy to embarrass the refugee center.

Then there's the particular class of expenses incurred by refugee women. This past year the NSC has become the unintended Santa Claus to village churches across the plateau. For a certain consideration, the priests will declare a refugee woman unraped, which means she can return home without prompting a war between her husband and the rapist (unless, of course, they are one and the same). There's been such a demand for this service lately that some priests have taken to printing out certificates with cute church logos. Just fill in the names, get the signatures, presto!— another crime eradicated. Avbury calls it her Resettlement Fund.

Sometimes, when a woman runs from her husband, the fund can replace her dowry. That way, the husband can agree there has been no marriage, without having to repay her family. Indeed, it's his chance to extort a second dowry from some other prospective bride's family. The first woman's family doesn't have to threaten the ex-husband, or go hungry saving for a new dowry. If there's more than a suckling baby at issue, though, it's seldom so simple. Daddy wants to keep his walking property.

"We have money," Avbury explains, "to help women who truly need it." She pauses, waiting for Zimara to comment, but Zimara offers nothing but a stare. So the doctor asks, "If we went ahead with this, how would it work? Konsta, is it? How do we reach out to this guy?"

Zimara and Arasely discuss go-betweens, relatives, approaches, appeals, the going rate these days. Miryam has her own suggestions; she has done this work before. They also need a way to keep in touch with Zimara's cousin.

Arasely says, "Filipa is the best way. Yesenya's sister. Get a comm to her, and she can bring it to Yesenya in Hidris."

"And give Filipa one to keep," adds Zimara.

"More devices, more chance of getting caught," frets the doctor.

"Let's trust these women," Miryam says. "If they agree to take the comms, we have to figure they know how to hide them. We'll seal them in Watertite."

"Passthroughs," says Avbury.

"What's that?" Zimara asks.

"Some kind of chip. Makes them harder to track," Miryam explains. She agrees to make first contact. "This could take a while," she tells Zimara.

Zimara nods. She's getting tired.

"Understand," the doctor says. "We will try. We don't know how far we can take it." Avbury nods toward the other cots, the other women. "Our first obligation is to the women here. To you." Zimara stares, eyes like coals. Avbury feels foolish for the first time in years. She stands up. "Let me know," she tells Miryam.

● A Father's Advice

Not hearing from Yorg, Zimara borrows Miryam's comm to call her father in Echmash. Her father doesn't recognize the voice, so much has it changed.

"It's Zee, Dad. Zimara."

"They told me you were alive."

"How are my my children?"

"What do you think? Their father takes care of them."

"You haven't seen them."

"You did a stupid thing. You caused a lot of grief for everyone."

"Yorg won't talk to me. So you tell him I'm coming back."

"Don't come back!" her father almost shouts. A little more calmly, "This is not a good time."

"I'm coming to get my kids."

"Listen to me, will you? Damn it. You always push push push. Can you listen?"

His daughter says nothing.

"Yorg is not ready. He has a lot to consider."

"If he's afraid to let me stay, I'll bring them to your house."

"You can't do that. Are you trying to set me against Yorg and the Crusaders?"

"They are your grandchildren."

"And what about the dowry? You know how stingy your husband is. He'll never pay it back."

"The hell with the dowry."

"You ungrateful child. Title to the timber lot that my grandmother bought. The Yaobin . . . ."

"The motorbike was broken."

"But he fixed it, didn't he? You come back now, what am I going to do with you? Do you know how many years it took to make your dowry?"

"So you better persuade Yorg to take me back."

"And they say your face . . . . Who is going to want you?"

"I'm coming for my children."

Reluctantly, "Wait. Wait. Let me talk to Yorg."

"Do it soon."

● Organization

When she can walk, Zimara walks everywhere. She has been to the market town near Echmash, but she has never seen anything like New Start Settlement — commissary, warehouses, motor pool, clinics, surgery, offices, security stations, latrines, assembly hall, comm center, residential shelters, mostly assembled from aluminum and canvas and polycarbonate frames, plus a tangle of pipes and cables for water and power. An overnight city for ten thousand sick or desperate people.

"What's this? How does it work?" she asks in her wanderings. Miryam notes her interest and gives her the tour, introducing her to a lot of the staff. A day or a week later Zimara returns to this or that area with more questions. She sounds out the words on the signs, and is pleased when she recognizes one or two. She begins to see an order in the constant change and motion. There's a kind of ritual here, too, forms and procedures, but it's very unlike the ones she grew up with. She wants to know how all the moving parts fit together.

Vanessa runs the comm operation, everything from weather forecasts to grant proposals to real-time assessments of raids and refugee movements. Mukherjee, Avbury's second in command, schedules the staff rotations and the food and meds deliveries. Rekady the smuggler turned camp driver lets Zimara

spend a couple afternoons watching him fix trucks; she resolves to come back when her right arm works again. Klesir in the commissary shoos her away; Zimara has too many questions.

Mukherjee has a suggestion: "You want to know what's going on here? Go to the Residents' Council. They meet every month. Anyone can go. They talk about all sorts of things to make this place run better."

"Yes, so I hear. They talk and talk."

"You think the people who live here should not talk about what happens?"

Zimara shrugs. "Avbury's the boss. She tells us what to do. What's the point of all this chatter? Maybe it makes them feel better. Anyway," she waves her good hand, "that's not for me. I'll be going home soon."

● The New Jerusalem

Toilets are everywhere; her job takes her all over the place; Yesenya walks miles every day, sometimes with the Skylanders, sometimes by herself. She hauls water from the well and offal from the kitchen, slops the pigs, scrubs latrines and mausolea, launders uniforms and recycles canvass body bags. It's Fetch this! Scrub that! Workshops, the forge, the brewery, the slaughterhouse, the power plant, the gift shop for pilgrims, the barracks, the data stores and telecomm center, Yesenya tromps through it all with her mop, buckets, baskets. Only the gated cloister is forbidden to her, lest her presence pollute the purity of frightened men transfixed by God. She hears the chatter of loitering Crusaders, and now and again snatches of the commanders' conversations. They don't even know she's there.

Often Yesenya has to shlep merchandise from the cellars to the gift shop for the pilgrims— prayer beads, medallions, airbrush paintings of the saints, laminated prayer scrolls to hang from your neck, candles shaped like mortar shells, miniature monks' tunics (just the thing for little Slobodan's birthday), and of course crucifixes of every size and ornamentation, and (given the basic design limits) a startling variety of shapes. Against one wall the monks have lined up samples of the home-, shrine- and basilica-size crosses; you pick your size and color, and the monks will work one up for you and ship it within five to seven business days. They've got a cooler stocked with soft drinks and Mountain Monastery, the Rudomil home brew. They sell prayer leaves, Bible video games, and recordings of their high-service chants (Sevik's doing, and he sees to it that every Crusader buys a set). Sankt Rudo and Sankta Ildefa have their own car plates, bobbleheads, and dashboard ornaments. And just so you remember the important things, you can buy colored stickers for the windows of your home and car:
The meek shall inherit the Earth. The obedient ascend to Our Father in Heaven.
The meek shall inherit the earth . . . when the tough have cleaned it up.
Life is tough, so chew slowly.
The Spirit is willing and will subdue the flesh.
We believe in UFOs: Understand, Fight, Obey
You may not remember God but He remembers you— and everything you've done.
Uphold, Uplift, Uppreciate
Don't mess with the Almighty. He'll kick your ass.
You'll believe all right when you beg for water in the fiery pit of Hell.

The most popular items are the little plastic crutches, wheelchairs, hands, eyeballs and dolls people buy to fix to the miracle wall just inside West Gate. There's one doctor in all of Hidris, on call for the top Crusaders. So the miracle wall gets a lot of traffic.

The monks hate the gift shop. It was Nagahry's idea. If the monks weren't so joyful, they'd scream, Leave us alone! They used to get all the cash they needed from three or four festivals a year. Now the Crusade takes a big cut of everything.

One of the least pleasant jobs for Yesenya is scraping and painting over the graffiti. It's hard for her to reach high to clean rough surfaces. The boys have scribbled over every outside wall, sparing only the churches. The rude monsters they draw have clearly descended from the fabulous beasts perched on the monastery's columns and battlements. Once, inside a colonnade, Yesenya comes across Konsta's name scratched into the stone, with the descriptor Love Master. Instead of painting over the name, she draws next to it a stooped, popeyed creature clutching a lumpy penis with one hand, thumbing its asshole with the other. After that, she takes more of an interest in the vandals. Who are these people?

For all that, inside the grim walls, the place is magical. Stern prophets in stone. Snarling demons with tail-like tongues. Proud princes pissed off at their own defunctitude. Ornate windows and balconies, lacy screens of iron, sudden mountain vistas.

The complex at Sankt Rudomil is one of the best remaining examples of the so-called Pontic style, a garish and sometimes bizarre agglomeration of Skythian, Tabrizi and Caucasian design detritus deposited by the various gangs that have trampled over this ill-fated land. The Crusaders, of course, reject the idea that their mother church reflects any infidel influence. Indeed, Doctor Sevik once wrote a tract about it entitled, "Holy Rudomil: Our New Jerusalem." He flogged it to a score of European scholarly journals, but even then their bias against Rudeny was all too obvious. At last it came out as a special insert in the Army newsletter *Blood of the Lamb.*

"Leaky space" is the Pontic's distinguishing feature, a Piranesi swirl of interpenetrating arcades, sudden openings, massive walls bored through here and there by sinous passages emerging suddenly like ant tunnels against a sheet of glass. Parapets perforated with shadowy recesses, like bubbles in volcanic glass, or overgrown with cystoid protrusions, some elaborately screened, others propped open with squat columns like teeth. Courtyards and corridors intersect at odd angles, swelling with columns and statuary before narrowing and diving into the ground once more, cyclopean centipedes of stone. Archways, spires and pinnacles carve provinces from the sky. Overlapping terraces spill in tiers down to the town plaza, on one side, and fountain-splashed gardens on the other.

Inside, magnificent murals in cinnabar and sulphur, the bleak dark green of winter pine, the blue-black of mountain twilight. The colors waver like wine and gold in candlelight; heavy, shadowed; clutching photons as an old man does coin. And gleaming pools of liquid, congealed: spattered blood like melted candles, rivers black as flows of frozen lava. The theme of all these paintings: the suffering of the martyrs; a selection of the finest impalings, disembowelings, beheadings, and burnings by Latins, Huns, and Turks over the centuries, in the most vivid detail— at once an inspiration, incitement, and how-to manual: Do unto others.

Yesenya doesn't understand the sacred history. As she moves through echoing halls and dank underground passages, she has a different frame of reference. "It's like Killer Bots," she tells Vlasta, who knows this palm game well. "But better," Vlasta says. Emrush sucks his thumb.

● Don't Tell Blago

After Zimara's father warns Yorg that his wife plans to return, Yorg calls the priest in a panic. The cat's out of the bag now.

"We fucked up. Zimara is alive."

"What are you talking about?"

"Miroslava came to see me. She's back from the camp near Saray. They've got Zimara. She wants to come back."

"Don't talk to her."

"I didn't. But Zimara called the old man. Now he wants me to take her back."

"She's dead. I declared her dead," the priest insists. In the beginning was the Word.

"You told me to go to Brother Michael. We made Blago pay."

"Calm down. Zimara is dead. Some impostor is trying to deceive you."

"I'm telling you, she's alive. They know about the kids, and my farm, and . . . ."

Father Narek is very stern. "Get a grip on yourself, man. She's dead. Keep your mouth shut. Whoever this woman is, she'll go bother someone else."

“Will you talk to her father?”

“I’ll talk to him.”

"Blago cannot know," Yorg says.

"That whore is still alive," the priest reports a minute later.

"Alas, so many are. A Crusader's work is never done. Which whore are we talking about?" Blago pages through porn as he talks into the comm.

"The woman you took from the mountainside last month—"

"You got to be specific."

"Slashed face? Husband name of Yorg?"

"That hole? You sure?"

"She's at the refugee camp. She wants this Yorg to take her back. He told me himself."

"Lying bastard. I gave him my ax. I seem to remember we paid you a nice fee as well."

"He took me in, same as you."

"OK. You tell him, bring her back, then chop her up. Got it?"

"Sure. But let's think about this a minute." Father Narek reminds Blago of New Start's resettlement fund.

● Sacrilege

Yesenya learns to rattle her bucket as she goes around corners, so as not to frighten the local fauna. One day she goes through a doorway and startles a flock of monks. They scatter like geese, honking and clutching their skirts. One looks back with a poisonous glance. Girls! Devils!

Next day Yesenya comes back with the Skylanders. The old men shriek and scatter once more. The girls bang their buckets and sing as loud as they can. They sing the Washerwoman Song.

That afternoon Goranka is waiting at the gate when Yesenya’s shift is over.

"Who else was with you? Who else insulted these holy men?" Goranka has Yesenya's collar in her fist. As she shakes the girl, Goranka glares at the others. Yesenya says nothing. Goranka punches her once, so that Yesenya drops to the ground, hand over her bloody nose. "No food for you tonight, nasty girl," Goranka says. Later Yesenya hears her laughing about it with Vyolka.

● Promise

Yorg gets the call he doesn't want.

"You take me for a fool? You steal my money?" Blago screams.

"Honest, I didn't know! You said she was dead."

"I'll deal with her later. You took my money! You took my ax!"

"I'll give you back the ax. I was going to call you."

"I kill liars!"

"The priest told me to shut up. He said it must be an impostor."

"Sure. You lied to him, too."

"He called you?"

"Of course. You think the blackskirt would dare hold out on me?"

"That sack of shit!"

"I want my money."

"There is no money. I got the Jew, but that was just for money I owed him. I don't have any money."

"That was my Jew. You took my Jew." Before Brother Michael told Yorg to kill the butcher, Blago had never heard of him. But he knows Yorg will not dispute the fine points. It's a well-established principle of holy war: you do good, you pay the boss. You mess up, you pay the boss.

"I don't have any money!" Yorg wails.

"OK, then I come to get my ax and I chop your head." Blago hangs up.

Yorg flings his comm to the floor. "I don't have any money!" he shouts.

But he does. After he killed the Jewish butcher, he and his pals sold all his supplies and equipment —cutting tools, hooks, hoses, scales, display counters, freezers full of dead animals— come to think of it, Blago might have appreciated a bone saw or two. The butchers in Obeyyed, knowing where all this came from, didn't want to buy, but the Crusaders clarified their choices for them. Then Yorg went around to the neighbors with the butcher's little book, and collected all they owed him.

Yorg didn't want to kill the butcher, who was after all a friend of sorts, as much as you can be friends with a Jew. It was Brother Michael made him do it. Yorg worked hard for this profit, and doesn't want to cough it up to momma-says-I'm-a-prince Blago. It's not fair.

The prince calls back ten minutes later. "I know how you can pay me," he says, and explains how to work it. "I tell you, though, that cow sets foot in Echmash, I come to kill you both."

Next day Miryam gets the call, then confers with Zimara. "Yorg says you can't come back. He'll send you the kids. But he wants 5,000 riyal."

Zimara starts to cry, then fists away her tears. "I'm sorry. It's too much. Can you help?"

"No way Avbury will authorize that kind of money. It's way over dowry. We start paying that kind of ransom, the Crusaders will be kidnapping kids right and left. But she'll kick in maybe a thousand. That's plenty. And Yorg will give you a hard time, but he'll take it. What else is he going to do?"

"You don't know him. He's mean and stupid."

Miryam takes Zimara by the shoulders. "Trust his greed. Do you trust his greed?"

Zimara thinks a moment. "Yes." Now she feels better— the pig.

So it's arranged. Much yelling and comm-banging —Miryam gives as good as she gets— and finally Yorg promises to bring Aloyzi and Gret to New Start. They'll pay Yorg when he shows up with the children.

Konsta gets a call about the same time.

"You piece of shit. You said she was dead."

"Captain! What are you talking about?"

"That bitch from Echmash. She's not dead. She's at the refugee place. Now she wants to go back to her village."

"She was practically dead. She was hardly breathing. I told Sejad, Hit her in the head with a shovel."

"You didn't have a shovel."

"We didn't have a shovel. So we threw her in the river."

"When the time comes, you're going to finish the job."

"You won't tell Brother Michael, will you?

"One more fuckup. He'll kill you, you know."

● Exile

"I can't go back now," Zimara says.

“You don’t have to go back,” Avbury tells her. “You stay here until we find you a place in Saray.”

“My mother’s people come from Ogonyok.”

“Aunties? Cousins? Even better. Let’s contact them— “ she looks at Miryam, who nods. “In the meantime, you stay with us.”

"I'll get a job, and I'll pay you every week," Zimara promises.

"You know we are not a bank. This is not a loan."

"Then I'll pay and you use it for someone else."

"OK, we'll do that." They shake hands. The doctor knows Zimara has to show she is not helpless. Avbury doesn't think Zimara knows how hard it will be to find work, never mind set aside that kind of money.

● Lumpy Chocolate

Konsta returns still buzzed from a Kingdom action and heads straight to the Nunnery. Vyolka keeps a room there for newlyweds to fuck. Konsta and Yesenya don't yet fit the category, but close enough for God’s work. Konsta takes Yesenya there to rape her. First, as he has been taught, he kneels down with the girl and murmurs a little prayer to St. Uzh, patron of bodily fluids.

“We’re bound by a sacred oath,” he tells her. “I’m the man, and you’re the woman. God wants us to do this.”

Afterwards Konsta washes his prick, as Captain Blago has taught all the boys. “Where’s the soap?” he calls, but Yesenya does not answer. “You are a very messy wife,” he notes sadly as he dries his hands.

When Konsta comes out of the bathroom he picks through his backpack and pulls out a box. Chocolates— lumpy, oddly misshapen; he grabbed them from an Anabaptist’s shop before he burned it two days ago. Yesenya won't look at him and won’t take the box.

“Go ahead. We’ll be married soon. We’ll have a big party, and you’ll have a beautiful dress, and all your sisters and cousins will be there.”

Yesenya starts sobbing, remembering Filipa and Zimara.

Konsta hurls the box of chocolates against the wall. He pulls her off the bed and slaps her hard. He stands over her, shouting. “See what you made me do! See!” His heart isn't in it, though, and he stalks out.

The girl lies on the floor, tonguing the tear in her mouth, watching flies buzz in the window. The open door creaks with a breeze.

Shuffling to the gate, hands in his pockets, Konsta thinks of the girl he killed the year before. He just gets so angry sometimes. But he's trying to let his better nature shine through. Clean, cheerful and considerate, that's what women like. He saw it online.

Maybe he should be more patient. He has a little sister himself, a year younger than Yesenya. Already his buddies have been making remarks. “Cutey pie!” says Endvaip, and punches him in the arm. “Too bony,” says another. “Give us a discount!” They try to make him mad, just for fun, but he won’t let them.

Yesenya, though, she belongs to him now, he’s responsible for her. He can't let her disobey. The big danger is that one day she might display some slight sign of resistance or disrespect in public; then he'd be in big trouble with Blago.

Shoes. Girls like shoes. And he knows just where he can steal some. Shiny blue ones with sparkles and bows. Feeling better already, Konsta starts to whistle. Soon he'll be seventeen.

● Repair Job

Zimara's face is still a mess, but most of the bandages are off. Like all the residents, Zimara has got chores. Hers are to collect the bags of shit and blood and bandages from the clinics and haul them in a cart to the incinerator just beyond the fence. She has gotten adept at doing this with her one good arm. She works slowly but steadily. Flies swarm in ecstasy, sampling the bags of waste and the ooze on her face. The bloody crucifix is beginning to emerge from the ruins of her cheek. Avbury and Nzangiye watch from the door of a tent.

"I know you're busy," Avbury tells him, "but what about the face? We are trying to give these women back their lives."

"You don't have to tell me. DesJarlais is willing to help, when we get a break in the schedule— a week, ten days."

"Soon as you can."

"How's it going, her and the other women?" Nzangiye asks.

"They are still afraid of her. It's like she's contagious. To have been the focus of such concentrated hatred . . . . "

"They're scared it will rub off on them."

"Something like that. It's hard to see such cruelty without suspecting that somehow she brought it on herself."

"I know. That's the first thing I thought when I saw her: What did she do to provoke them?"

"Which may be the deepest wound these refugees carry. They've been driven from their homes. They've lost children or parents. A lot of them think that somehow they deserve it. They must have done something horrible to earn such punishment."

"When I do the rounds, usually there's another woman with Zimara, seems to be taking care of her."

"Arasely. Same village. So I think the others will come round, too. Let's take care of the face. That will help."

"Teeth, too."

"Right."

"You know we got nothing fancy here. We can get rid of that swastika. But I don't know how much we can reconstruct." They can see from Zimara's right side that she has fine cheekbones, broad lips, a strong jaw, heavy brows.

"Can't afford to send her to Athens," Avbury says. "Even if I could get the papers. I want to see a surgical plan." Nzangiye nods.

● Aspirations

Yesenya drags herself upstairs to the attic. The other girls know where she's been.

"Never mind," says Taline, and wraps her arms around Yesenya. "These Crusaders, all they want is to rub their wee-wees. You see those monks? You see how bent over they are? That's from trying to lick their wees. Yes, every day, like dogs," and she bends over and bobs her head at her crotch. "Konsta is going to curl up like that, you watch. And you know how they pray so much? What do you think they're praying for?" She sticks out her tongue, trying to touch the tip of her nose, and crosses her eyes. "Longer tongues!"

The Skylanders giggle, even Yesenya.

● Reading Class

One day Zimara asks for a Bible. "I'll find you one," Miryam tells her. "You can read?"

"I can read. My mom taught me in secret, as her mother taught her."

Late that night, as Miryam leaves a lover, she sees Zimara cross-legged in a narrow pool of light spilling from the surgery, reading, her lips moving. Miryam wants to say something, but Zimara's ferocious concentration forbids it.

A few days later Nzangiye remarks to Miryam, "Looks like Zimara is getting on better with the other women."

"Yes?"

"I notice a little group over at the pumps. Zimara's in the middle. Seems to be chatting away."

"Let me go look."

Six or seven women have gathered in the pavilion for the power meters. They sit crosslegged on the concrete slab just outside the chain link, a couple with toddlers in their laps. Other kids play in the dirt beyond the slab. Each woman holds a square of rigid plastic packing material, a couple sheets of paper, and a pencil. Zimara is showing them how to write their names.

Next day they draw and label pictures of their families. Miryam asks to see what Lemane has done. It's a nice sketch of two women. Underneath the picture she's written, "I love my mother. I love my sister." Lemane has scratched out two earlier attempts at "sister", but the third is just fine.

"Is it right?" Lemane asks.

"It's exactly right." Miriam flips the page. The reverse shows it to be part of an old inventory of imported meds.

The other women share their pages and congratulate each other quietly. They cover their mouths with one hand and hold out their work for Miryam to admire. Zimara watches with a small smile, her fist around a marker.

"What can I get you?" Miryam asks.

"Paper. More pencils," Zimara rasps. "And a better place to meet. More want to join us, but we have no more room here."

● Youth Pastor

Now here's a rare sight. Few get to see Sevik's nurturing side, but the Doctor takes seriously his responsibility for the young souls in his charge. If troop morale isn't a security concern, he doesn't know what is. Someone has got to make sure the boys maintain their fighting edge. So most Wednesday afternoons Sevik hosts a prayer study class in the chapel below his office in the Tower of Penance.

The boys feel privileged to be invited. They escape their captains for a couple hours, and the doctor puts on a good feed, as witness the table by the door loaded with all sorts of candy, pastry and the latest aerosols from the Hidris pop shops: Buzz, Plode, Craniyumm. More than that, it's an honor to be chosen by the famous Doctor Sevik. Their religion may be puzzling at times, but they feel they are in good hands with the pious and erudite scholar, who has spent his life delving into these mysteries.

Today, as usual, Doctor Sevik is late, but not absent. He has only recently discovered the network of narrow passages that thread throughout the monastery, punctuated here and there by small lattice screens. From these you can listen in on conversations in halls and chambers in a dozen buildings. Known as Abbot's Ears, they've been for centuries an indispensable tool of monastery management, the surest way to weed out malcontents before they infect the whole flock. So now he listens as the boys

mill around a table by the door, anxious to engulf as many stimulants as they can before the Doctor arrives. Around great gobs of sugar and caffeine they boast about their spiritual exploits and acquisitions. For Sevik it's a good gauge of commitment to the Crusade. As he has been careful to select boys from several units, he can gather useful data on their captains as well.

The monastery workshops produce new souvenirs every week. "Take a look!" says one stalwart, "The Devoted Gohar flayed by the Tatars. Imagine his suffering! Imagine how much he loved Our Lord!" The scapular depicts a naked kneeling saint, hands clasped, bulging eyes rolled to heaven, as you might expect after they cut off his eyelids.

"That's nothing," says another, passing around an image of the saint as he chokes the Demon Sklavius till he vomits up the key to the Coffer of Grace.

A third asks, "Have you heard the latest from the Archbishop?" The Archbishop publishes his own line of personalized inspiration leafs, which the boys like to compare and trade. People have got so used to living online, sharing cyberspace with billions, that material possessions, however flimsy, have made a comeback. These boys like to have something in hand they can decorate themselves and call their own. Gives them something no one can take without permission-- or anyway the illusion.

Most of these performances end with Nagahry inviting his audience to pray for the people in their families, and names them one by one. As the databases are none too good, sometimes the listeners hear of grandfathers they never knew they had. That doesn't bother the fans. They understand the imperfections of technology, which does not diminish the comfort of the apparent intimacy of the Archbishop's voice. Next year promises new marvels— Nagahry has leased a bot from Odessa to simulate interactive conversations. As more empty aerosols litter the table and roll to the floor, the boys talk faster and faster. They are getting harder to understand.

One kid does not take part. He stands to one side, almost motionless, hands clenched, staring at the floor. His face is a swollen mess. Deep abrasions mark both cheeks, as if he's tried to polish a sidewalk with his face. A loose flap of brow threatens to drop over his right eye, and every couple minutes he has to pat it back into place. Konsta knows this kid, and offers to slot him D-Range. The other boy murmurs something, but won't look up. Konsta shrugs his shoulders and rejoins the others.

Mikchr raises a silver medallion, snatched immediately from his hand.

"What's this? A bit of old tin."

"It's not! They gave it to me. It's an award."

The boy who grabbed it tries to make out the inscription. "One hundred riyal! You paid a hundred riyal for a piece of tin?"

"I donated a hundred riyal. It says I'm a blessed donor."

At ten months in service, Konsta is a jaded veteran. Still, he figures he can do better than this suck-up. "Look here," he says, and shows a copper disk with the image of a woman with wings. He picked it off a corpse, but claims he got it on pilgrimage to Bovril Shrine.

The other boys hoot. "I know that piece. You got to climb the mountain on hands and knees. Show us your knees!"

"Queers!" he replies, to no effect.

Fortunately for Konsta, another boy offers something even more laughable: a holo of a fierce old man spitting lightning. At first they're impressed, until Turdowak recognizes it: "Hey! That's the lid off a box of Red Bolt Chew!" He laughs so hard he spits up his food.

Mikchr is not done, not by a long shot. With a grand flourish, he displays the best trinket of all— a holo of the Virgin, taken from a famous icon, and rendered in breathless detail: a teen mom with a heart-shaped face, big eyes as blue as her tunic, haloed in massy golden hair. She looks at you frankly. She knows every secret thing about you, but far from being embarrassed or repulsed, she wants you to tell her. She wants you to say —

Konsta snatches the holo, and is immediately dragged down by the others. Frantic grabbings threaten the trays of food. The scuffle breaks up only when Doctor Sevik enters the chapel.

"Young men!" Sevik bellows as they form up in haste. "Bless you for coming today. Shall we pray?"

The Crusaders circle the lectern as Sevik gives them their cues. "Let's close our eyes, boys, and clasp your hands. You, Mikchr! Now I want you to talk as if you were walking with Jesus in a garden. You are sitting on a bench in a beautiful park. You can feel the sun on your face, but it's not too hot, because there's a gentle breeze bringing the sweet perfume of flowers. You can hear the birds singing in the trees. And there's someone sitting next to you on the bench. Your best friend who loves you. You can talk to Him about anything. Now imagine that you open your eyes. No, 'Stim, keep them closed. Use your imagination! You see all the flowers in the field. Bumblebees zoom by, loaded yellow with pollen. You don't look at your friend yet. You just feel His presence. He wants to talk with you. He wants so much to know you. He understands everything about you. And He loves you, no matter what you tell Him. Now you both stand, and you walk the pathway among the flowers. And there are gushing fountains, and baby birds playing in them. Now talk to your friend Jesus. Let the words come to you. Tell Him what you need."

As the boys start to murmur, Sevik walks among them, listening, tapping this one or that on the shoulder or head with a hymnal. "Louder!" he demands. "Don't be afraid to talk to your best friend. Lift your voice to heaven!"

Sevik requires a second round. "This time you pray for each other. You know your teammate, the one you like best. You know what problems he is wrestling with, like Jacob wrestled with the angel. Ask Jesus for His help and guidance!" A couple of the older boys mumble indistinctly, despite prodding from the Doctor. The younger ones just babble; and half a dozen cameras concealed around the room record it all.

"Praise God!" Sevik says at last. "Thank you for coming. Shall we begin? I can't wait to hear what our Lord has to say to us today!" Sevik folds his hands and bows his head. "Lord, lead us deeper into the One True Faith." He's got a bible on the lectern, which he flips open. He stares at the page a moment, and then starts reading. "Curious. This one is from Matthew. This is when the Romans arrest our Lord, and Peter denies him thrice before the cock crows." He recites the verses.

"Isn't it odd," he says. "We asked the Lord to lead us deeper into faith, and He shows us the passage about the apostle who ran away. Peter lost his faith and ran when our Lord needed him most. How do you feel about that? Here was our Lord, about to be scourged and crucified, and his most trusted disciple turned and ran. Would you do your mates that way?"

They all protest. They would never do such a thing.

"You say that, and yet you have doubts, don't you? Hesitations. Fear. Everyone does. The story of Peter shows that even the apostles have their moments of weakness. Peter knew the truth, but was afraid. At that moment he feared the government more than our Father who art in heaven." Sevik pauses to slap the lectern. "And what does our Lord say about those who refuse to believe? John fifteen six: 'If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.'"

Once Sevik starts, the boys recite the verse along with him. They know it well.

"Cast into the fire!" Sevik repeats. He glares at his students. "Do you know other examples of men who turned their backs on the lord?"

Mikchr the brown-noser mentions the Jew Amram, who sold out Sankt Sorighess.

"And what happened to him?" Sevik asks.

"They held him down and poured molten gold down his throat." The boys know this legend because in the museum gift shop you can buy a little twisted plug of brass, modeled after the much bigger golden glob still clogging the traitor's charred head, and kept to this day on a shelf somewhere within the monastery.

"Doubt is Satan's worm that eats into your heart. Paul says, He that doubts is damned, because whatever is not of faith is sinful. And what does Our Lord say about those who keep the faith?" the Doctor continues. "'I am the resurrection, and the life. Believe in me and you'll never die.'

"And more! Because if you keep the faith, you get access to unimaginable power. 'Believe in me, and whatever I can do, you can do too. . . . . whatsoever you ask in my name, I'll do it.'" Sevik closes the book. "We all have our doubts sometimes, our fears. The devil is always scratching at our minds, trying to make us afraid. But when we trust the Father, He will always give us the strength to obey. Anything you ask, He says, that shall be done. That's God's promise to the faithful."

"So. Let's share. Have you ever felt the surge of God's grace after a moment of doubt or hesitation? Tell us how the Lord works in your life." Sevik looks around, points at Boghos. "I heard you had a problem recently. Why don't you tell us about it?"

If Boghos appears a bit reluctant, it's because it's never a good idea to talk too much about money in this crowd. "Yes, so the old raghead wouldn't tell us where he hid the money and he died and we didn't know what to do, but we prayed on it, and sure enough, we heard a little noise from a cupboard. It was his little daughter and she knew just where it was. God is great!"

"Who else?" the Doctor asks. "Come, share your faith with us. Tohdzham, what's this I hear about you're not wanting to meet your obligations? Can you tell us about that?"

Tohdzham rubs the back of his neck. "I just wasn't sure she was right for me."

"Who? Come on now, don't be shy."

"Gabriyela. We're engaged." Gabriyela is another kid on Goranka's clean-up crew.

"Sure. It's natural to be a little nervous. Go ahead."

"I don't know. I just wasn't ready."

"No one ever is. That's why Jesus is there to help us. Did you pray?"

"With God's help we can do anything!" Mikchr contributes.

Tohdzham shuffles his feet.

"And tell me, son," Sevik puts it to him, "do you want to save this girl? Do you really want to save her?"

Tohdzham nods and raises an index finger. "When I see her work so hard for the Crusade, I praise God we took her."

"You rescued her from spiritual slavery."

"Yes. Now she's free!"

A chorus of "Will of God!" greets this announcement. When the congratulations dwindle, Sevik turns to Konsta.

"Brother Konsta, what about you? Do you walk in the Lord?"

Konsta straightens up with a jerk. "I think so," he admits modestly. "Captain Blago had us out all day on exercises, I wasn't sure I'd be able to get here on time, but I prayed, and the detonators didn't work, and the Captain sent us home." Konsta has been stretching his foot to nudge Mikchr's backpack closer. He's determined to steal the Virgin holo.

"So you prayed for the Crusade to fail?"

"Not at all! But prayer meeting is important, too, isn't it?"

"That was your moment of doubt?" Sevik paces, shaking his head. He looks up."You know, lying doesn't hurt me. It hurts your heavenly Father when you're not straight with Him."

Not the strongest argument with fatherless Konsta, but he has learned always to have a back-up story— on this occasion one he's sure the Doctor will appreciate. "It's just that I feel ashamed. I prayed for the Lord to release me from temptation, but I guess my faith just isn't strong enough."

"How many times?" Sevik demands.

"I don't know. A lot."

"Do you look at pictures? Blonde women, right? Our Rudeny women aren't good enough for you. You let these Western whores defile you. But it's OK." Sevik throws an arm over Konsta's shoulder

and squeezes. “When you are united with the Father, truly one with God, these earthly temptations won’t matter any more. Your body may be here, eating and drinking and shitting, but your soul is one with the Holy Spirit. It’s like you cast off your body. Paul tells us, ‘Walk in the Spirit, and you can’t fulfill the lust of the flesh.’ Sure, you might feel tempted. But the God part of you is above all that. God can’t sin, can He? And when you are united with Him, He will keep you free from sin. Paul says, If you let the Spirit lead you, you are above the law.”

“Now then. Do you want to be together with the Father?”

Konsta allows as how he does. He’s not sure what that might entail. He recalls his own dad, the late unlamented, easing heavy onto his cot in the black of night, a smothering canvas of tobacco and garlic and something else.

“We don’t live here," Sevik tells the boys. "This festering mess of a planet is just a moment’s stop on our eternal journey. The world is a shit-stained toilet, cracked and squirming with disease, and our time here no more than the chance to shed the putrefying weakness and temptations that plague us so. Get rid of them. They don’t matter! Forget about them. Shit them out and flush them away!

“Tell, me Konsta. When you go on a Kingdom action, and you’re in the middle of all the screams and blood and fire . . . and after, how do you feel after?”

Konsta always wants to throw up. But that’s not it. Konsta is sure the Doctor is searching for another answer.

“Do you feel clean, Konsta?”

And Sevik is right. Konsta does feel clean then, like after he throws up. And calm, and connected somehow, like he has touched something deep. “Clean, yes. That’s how I feel.”

Sevik turns him by the shoulders, to face the other boys. “And you put on the shining garment, and God accepts you into his love forever. Would you like that?” He squeezes Konsta again.

Konsta wriggles from Sevik's grip and raises both hands to the ceiling. “Take me unto Thee!” he demands.

The Doctor is not done. “Men! You know that feeling you get when you kill an apostate? That’s the Lord working through you. Imagine how it would be to have that feeling all the time. That’s what you’ll get when you are truly united with the Father. When you are one with your Father, everything you do is the will of God. You will be so far above man’s laws. ‘Whosoever abides in Him cannot sin.’ The Apostle John tells us that.

“But there is a price. You will be persecuted. You will be called a savage beast. ’If you were of the world,’” he paraphrases, “’the world would love you. But I have chosen you out of the world, and so the world hates you.’ Understand what He’s saying here? The Father loves you *because* they hate you, *because* you are doing His work, *because* you walk the path of righteousness. He can see into your heart, and He has chosen you, Konsta. He will lift you up out of this cesspool.

“So ignore the squeals of the pigs as you cut their throats— that’s only the voice of the Enemy, trying to confuse you, trying to make you weak. And all your fear and sadness and suffering, that’s just the down payment on your palace in Paradise. So what do you think? Do you want to be joined with Our Father Jesus Christ? Do you want to do the work of the King of Heaven and Earth?”

● Sinner Saved

Which brings him to the main business of the day. “Lorenko.”

The beat-up boy in the corner doesn’t look up. After a moment he shuffles forward.

“You had a moment of doubt.”

“Yes, Doctor.” It’s uncanny the way Sevik knows these things. Truly he must be inspired.

“So share with your mates. And don’t bother to lie to us. Our Lord is listening.”

“I kept missing the hospital.”

"What do you mean?"

"We were shelling Dragoman. 'Smash the hospital,' Captain Rahday told us. 'Level it! Don't let the blasphemers escape!'"

"But you disobeyed."

"Yes," Lorenko says at last.

"You were afraid." Lorenko starts to weep. "You know," Sevik continues, "your captain was going to dismiss you" —that is, Rahday was going to shoot him. "But I said, 'I know this lad. His uncle fought like an angel at Eskedneedzh. Let me talk to him. Perhaps we can save him yet.'" Lorenko dabs his eyes with his sleeves, very gently, so as not to dislodge the scabs. "Do you want to be saved?" Lorenko nods Yes.

Sevik clasps the back of Lorenko's neck. "Jesus knows you're afraid. It's all right. Because the battle is already won. You know that, don't you? 'Put on the armor of God, that you can stand against the wiles of the devil. For we fight not flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of darkness.' Remember, it's not people we fight, but the very hordes of hell. They crucified our Lord. We strike not flesh and blood but the face of Satan himself. What do you say, my brave soldiers? Are you ready to stick a hot poker in the devil's eye?"

They laugh and clap. "He better not come around here!" Mikchr proclaims. "I'll sock him in the nose!"

"The Lord promises us, when we put on the helmet of salvation, and the garments of vengeance, then He will repay fury to our enemies. Do you understand? Nothing can stop us when we stand with God. We walk in victory."

Sevik pulls Lorenko close and hugs him. "You know the government plants little machines in the patients in their hospitals. Right in their brains. Your Captain was trying to save them from a life of suffering and bondage. What do you think, men? Shall we pray for our brother here?" He pushes the boy to his knees and stands before him, both hands on Lorenko's head. Eyes closed, Sevik asks the Almighty to forgive this weak boy, to banish his fears, to make him fight like a lion for the Lord.

Sevik likes to close with a hymn. But he is an exacting choirmaster, and this is a chore for the boys. One wavering voice starts the chant, many take it up, it wanes, another joins, others interweave, until the Doctor interrupts and makes them start over. There are no hymnals, just lyrics projected onto a pilaster. This does not help much, as the words are in Old Rudenyan, and anyway few of these boys can read. Sometimes they wheedle, "Let's sing the Samson Song!" which has a very nice beat to it. But Sevik will have none of it: "Heresy!" he denounces. Composed in Austria in the 1700s, it's too recent and too western to count as part of the One True tradition. Sevik promises them they will sing before Brother Michael himself, if they can master the hymn. A couple of the boys do have lovely voices, for which they are punished in secret by their classmates.

Konsta slips out while the others demolish the last of Sevik's stimulants. He climbs six floors and exits onto a narrow platform below the globe of the bell chamber. He holds tight to the parapet as the monastery complex rotates beneath him. He takes out the holo he has stolen, touches the face of the Virgin, then slides it back into his pocket. He pulls down his trousers, kneels and masturbates furiously. When he's done he sits back on his heels, snuffling. The wind carries away the sweat on his balls and ass. "Mother," he cries. "Save me."

Across the way the Skylanders watch awestruck. "Isn't that Konsta?" asks Taline.

Yesenya nods. "What's he doing?" Looking down at an angle, they can't quite tell what's happening.

"He's praying," Taline decides.

● Artisan

Zimara finds the crafts workshops at New Start. They have materials and classes for clothing, woodwork, religious artifacts, toys and traditional Tsaynay masks. They sell through a shop in Saray and a few distributors in the EU. These handicrafts are in high demand among a certain set of rich people in Europe, and a way for the refugees to make money while they wait to go home. Many of these men and women bring great skill to this work, but younger people are just learning.

Arasely and Zimara are well known in Echmash for their fine embroidery, especially in making women's jackets. As she wanders through the aisles, though, it's the masks class that draws Zimara's interest. Rudeny has a very old tradition of masks for weddings, funerals, spring and harvest festivals. It has survived only by being coopted by Christianity. Pagan gods and nature spirits became saints and devils, and still dance in the change of seasons.

For years men monopolized the craft but here anyone can try it. The teacher is an old guy with nine fingers on gnarly hands. He spends a whole day showing people how to handle the tools correctly. Then he gives them wood, straw, glue, and paint. Some modern maskmakers have taken to using plasteen, which is stronger and easier to work with, but this master will have none of that. “Try it this way,” he tells his pupils. He tells others, “You can do it that way, but you better dye the fibers first.” Zimara doesn't like how her first mask turns out —a character from the tale of Rangor and the seven Bogmen— but already has an idea for the next.

● Secret Passage

Soon after Sevik finds them, the Skylanders too stumble upon the Abbot’s Ears spy corridors, when they see Brother Yanko swing open hinges on reliefs of Blessed Marta the Mute. They wait ten minutes then pop down the narrow staircase. They pass elaborately carved screens giving out on the Abbot’s garden and a chapel, and watch monks pass by unknowing. Eventually they come out by a trapdoor in the western baptistry. Takes them months to explore all the passages, and Yesenya has to revise her maps four times.

● Health Education

One day some jerk comes over the fence with an ax. New Start’s security guys surround him as he's trying to untangle from the wire. "Don't worry," he tells them, waving the blade, "this is not for you. Let me dice that cunt and take my kids, I'll be on my way."

Khamzat the security chief grins. Such a simple request; heartfelt. "Must be difficult," he says. "Your woman betrayed you."

"Exactly. That's it exactly. You know how it is." The interloper smiles back. He is a man among men. They understand each other.

Khamzat comms Avbury. "Got another one on the fence. Shall we apply the usual?" They have a protocol for this, involving the waste incinerators. When Avbury first set up New Start, she called the cops in Saray, asked them what to do with the heroes who kept trying to sneak into camp and reclaim their property.

"We don't want them," said Captain Kut. "For us climbing your fence is a very small offense.”

"These guys carry knives and guns. They aim to hurt someone."

"If they're Crusaders, the magistrates will let them go. The Crusaders will threaten the magistrates, and they know we can't protect them. The men you catch will surely return."

"So you can't help us at all."

"We can't help you enough," Kut shrugged. "Look, they tell me you've been in this refugee business a long while. What did you do in Darfur, in Syria?"

"OK," said Avbury. "Just checking." So NSC security takes care of these problems on its own.

This day Avbury is in a bad mood. She has had the runs for days, and it's getting worse. Half her staff have been sick, not to mention about a thousand residents. "These guys just keep coming back," she complains to Khamzat.

"I'm a firm believer in education," he says. "It's a little more trouble, but you get more lasting results." They have had this discussion before.

"OK. We'll do it your way," Avbury concedes. "Hold him, I'll be there in a minute." She has a safe in her office, and she takes out a little revolver and puts it in her pocket.

They take the ax man out behind the incinerators, where the camp residents can't see. The security guys can't resist talking later, though.

That night Miryam, DesJarlais, and a few others of the staff are self-medicating in a van in the motor pool. Miryam tells the story with bloodthirsty glee. "Avbury tells the guy, 'Your hands or your dick?' and of course the guy says, 'Suck my dick, you diseased dyke.' So, quite surgically, they smash his hands with the butt of a gun and send him on his way." She takes another hit. "He won't be climbing any more fences." Miryam shakes her head in admiration. "What a woman!" she says, meaning Avbury.

"Makes me nervous," DesJarlais says. "These freaks, they just come back. Maybe he'll bring a bomb next time."

"Not this guy," says Rekady.

"What do you mean?"

"Avbury patched him up after they busted his hands. She sent one of the guards back for her kit, and treated the ax-man before they let him go." Miryam hasn't heard this part.

"Saw the error of his ways," someone else suggests.

"Khamzat said he was crying, all right, but with pain and fury, not regret," Rekady explains. "He swore to come back and kill us all. No, it was the nature of the treatment. You know that old guy with gangrene, they kept amputating but he died anyway?"

"Yeah, one of Nzangiye's. Really awful."

"They just peeled the bandages off the corpse and wrapped our ax-man's hands with them. 'Don't take these off for twelve days,' Avbury told him, 'or you'll never use your hands again.' Then they sent him back to his village."

"He'll be dead in a week."

Rekady nods. "A long week. Everyone will watch."

"Science class," someone suggests.

"Physics, maybe. Action and reaction."

One of the doctors is appalled. "Avbury wouldn't do that. She's a doctor."

Rekady pokes him in the ribs. "I'm kidding. I'm kidding!" He passes the pipe. "Here, take another."

They all laugh. They're pretty high. They know he's not kidding.

● Intake

Miryam asks her, "You know how to write, yes?"

Zimara holds up her busted arm. "I know how. It's hard for me right now."

"All you need to do is push buttons. Come with me." Miryam starts to walk off, but Zimara stays put. Miryam stops and turns around.

"I don't know how to use those machines," Zimara explains.

"It's easy. I'll show you."

As head translator, Miryam also runs the camp's intake center. Some days there might be fifty or sixty stunned or starving refugees crowding the narrow shelter and spilling onto the packed dirt outside, nestling wailing babies in their arms, or propping up gasping old people. The worst off go for emergency treatment. The rest have to wait for the bureaucratic wheels to grind.

Camp staff need information to help them feed, treat, shelter and protect all these people, report to their funders, and reassure the government that they harbor no terrorists, criminals, slackers or trailer trash from the fifth dimension. Just as important, they need to let the new residents know what to expect from this place, and what the staff expects from them.

So there are lots of forms. Most of the men can read, most of the women can't, and Avbury insists on separate statements from each adult. Miryam puts Zimara to work helping people at the screens. She types in numbers and letters, using two fingers, and Miryam or another staffer look it over later. Sometimes men try to answer for women, but Miryam has a way of explaining sweetly why she needs the information direct from the women. Usually there's not much fuss. The men don't need reminding that if they could take care of their families they wouldn't have had to flee their homes.

Forms completed, the new residents are invited to grab food from a nearby table, then come back and wait some more. Next round the conversation is more open-ended. The staffers want to learn all the things the forms don't cover, and begin the process of building relationships. Miryam invites Zimara to sit in on a couple of these, and is pleased but not surprised when Zimara begins to ask questions— better questions, in fact, than Miryam has raised. After all, Zimara knows these people well, shares their background. She can untangle complicated family relationships, see through lies, and sense when something important has been left unsaid. Zimara understands the larger meaning behind some casual remark about a wedding, the loss of an orchard, or the return of an uncle from Germany. She also helps make the new arrivals feel more at ease. Lots of foreigners here, they see, but lots of home girls too.

The last step at Intake is for someone from the Residents' Council to come by and show the newcomers where they'll stay.

By the end of the week, Zimara is taking the lead in these interviews, while Miryam or another of the translators taps in the occasional note. They don't have to type much, because their software transcribes the audio with fair accuracy.

When Avbury gets back from Geneva, Miryam boasts of her new recruit. "I told you it would work. She's smart. She knows more about these people than I'll learn in a lifetime."

"You did good. What does Zimara get out of it?"

"She's not hauling bags of pus."

Avbury rubs her neck. "Also, she's got all the data you have. And understands it better."

"Does that bother you? I don't see a problem."

"Tell me, how goes it with the reading class?"

"More women sign up every day. Of course, Zimara is recruiting them right out of intake. That's good, isn't it?"

"Probably nothing to worry about."

"You're a control freak."

Avbury agrees. "My job."

Other data vultures circle 'round as well, none more annoying than the Political Police, in the person of Captain Kut. New Start Transition Settlement is sanctioned by the democratic government —they've got an elaborate contract with the UNHCR— but the presence of so many refugees near the capital makes the politicians nervous. They sure as hell don't want a tide of sick and homeless people flooding the city, so they're glad the camp spares them that. On the other hand, they don't like having these desperate people for near neighbors, either. They might bring disgusting habits. They might spread outlandish ideas. They might ask for help.

So Kut comes by every couple weeks for a chat with Avbury, and an update from Miryam's database. He’s a tall man with a belly and high boots. He would love to interrogate the residents, but Avbury won't allow it, not while they're inside the gates.

This time the Captain brings bad news: a new law compelling every refugee visiting Saray to leave by curfew. That means they can't stay with relatives or wait for the midnight bus. "Sorry. My masters don't know how to win this war, but they are inventive when it comes to new ways to make miserable people moreso. Makes the desk pilots feel mighty."

"You don't like them, why do you work for them?"

A question the cop has asked himself many times. Kut got his start as a young lad snitching on student groups for the generals. When the liberals took over, Kut adapted more readily than some of his office mates. The last two years, he has fairly bounded up the ladder. The Captain is nothing if not flexible.

There's always some speculation as to why Kut doesn't desert to the Crusaders. They'd love to know what he knows, and more than once have offered him big cash to tell. But so far he has stuck with the democrats. Maybe it's that he knows very well his bosses have him followed everywhere, suspecting treachery. Could be he just prefers the liberals, hapless as they seem sometimes, to the religious gangsters that have plunged his country into war. A smart man, though often bored. He enjoys sparring with the New Start chief.

She could not care less about his personal calculations. She wants him to do something about the black market in medicines. “Right outside our gates,” she says, referring to the shops and stalls stretching from the camp almost to the capital. “Everything they sell has been stolen from shipments the High Commission sent us. People here are suffering.”

“Not everything. They get a lot of LTM and powdered chalk from the repackagers in Hidris.”

“And the Captain is quite helpless to stop these crimes.”

He shrugs. “Consider it a tax. If the Minister of Health didn’t steal some of your meds —what is it? Ten percent? Twenty?— she wouldn’t allow any shipments at all. You’d be tangled for months in paperwork. At least they’re getting to market. The people just have to pay more, is all.”

“The bogus meds are dangerous. Poisonous.”

“Yes. Those I can curb.”

“So helpful,” says Avbury. She won’t hold her breath.

● Sisters

It takes Filipa two days by bus to get to Hidris, and the proceeds from sale of a cow to pay the border guards. She goes straight to the barracks for the wives. Vyolka bringsYesenya out. The girl slides out of Filipa's embrace. The sisters sit on a little bench in the garden.

Filipa makes small talk about Echmash, but Yesenya does not respond. She looks around impatiently.

Filipa says, "I know I didn't stop them from taking you, but I can help you here."

"You can't."

"I'll move to Hidris. I'll visit every day."

"Todor won't let you."

"I'm not going to ask Todor."

"He'll beat you."

"He punches like a woman. Listen," Filipa says, and she takes Yesenya's hand, "you smile, play stupid, and make your own space. Understand? You live your life and they won’t even see you."

"Is that how you do it?"

Filipa bites her lip. She's got a little grocery bag. She takes out an orange and offers it to her sister. Yesenya looks away. Filipa reaches in the bag, pulls up something else, the wood and cloth doll their father made for Yesenya years ago. When she was three, Yesenya named it Dandelion. The mouth and eyebrows give it an expression of perpetual surprise.

Yesenya hesitates, then pulls it to her lap. "I'll give it to Emrush," she says.

"Who's Emrush?"

"Emrush is Vlasta's brother," she says, as if Filipa should know this already.

Filipa looks around. "I have to tell you something. There's a comm in the doll."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a comm in the doll and I have one, too. I'll give you the number."

"Does Todor know?"

"Never mind about him. You have to memorize this number. You cannot save it on the comm."

Yesenya shrugs. She could memorize an encyclopedia.

"You can call Zimara, too. I know she wants to hear from you."

Yesenya holds her breath, then lets it out slowly. "Zimara? Zimara's alive?" Her eyes brim with tears.

Filipa picks up the doll. "Now this is very important. Do you have a place to keep this? Someplace you can get to, but no one can see?"

"Yes. I have a place."

"Keep it in the Watertite. It has a good battery, but needs a few hours charge every week. Understand?"

Yesenya nods. She watches her sister very closely.

"OK. You know how you used to take off Dandelion's head? You'll find the comm inside." Filipa recites her own number again, and one at New Start. "That's Miryam. She'll get Zimara. Where no one can see you, yes?" Filipa stands. "I'll come back tomorrow. I love you, sister."

Yesenya throws her arms around Filipa, squeezes tight just a second, lets go and runs away.

● Readers

Too many women are showing up to read at the power pavilion, so Miryam arranges for them to meet in the dining prefab in between meals. At first all they have is some pencils, markers and notepapers that Zimara has scrounged from the staff. For her whiteboard she uses a plastic table top propped against a column. Zimara is not that great a reader herself, but she's a good teacher, and soon she has recruited staff to help. Nurses and doctors take turns reading from their favorite books, and helping the women copy passages. Miryam comes to translate.

The women are excited, and bring their kids to the class. Every day more women want to join. Zimara asks Mukherjee for more time slots, and more places. Finally, the administrator reminds her, "Take it easy. You can't work with them all at once. Work hard with these first students, and then they can help you with the rest."

Zimara thinks this is a great idea. Next day she sets up an extra class for six of the most advanced learners, and tells them she wants them to become teachers. Teachers! They like the sound of that, and work extra hard.

Mandalika is a short woman with powerful arms, an easy smile and a loud voice. Of all the women, she has the hardest time with reading. She doesn't get it at all. How can puny marks on a page represent feelings and ideas? Nevertheless, she comes every day, two blonde sons in tow. She keeps her heavy hands on their necks, to make sure they pay attention. She listens to them read aloud, and is surprised and excited one day when she finds herself recognizing some of the words. She helps clean up after

every class. Zimara puts her in charge of scrounging supplies, for which Mandalika turns out to have a bit of genius.

It's not exactly stealing. Always there's a camp staffer who knows what they've taken. But no one writes any receipts, and Mukherjee doesn't ask. Mukherjee does bring it up once with Avbury, who tells him, "We've got bigger things to worry about."

● Konsta Sees an Opportunity

After Yesenya calls, Zimara tracks down Miryam. “I talked to my cousin in Hidris."

"She OK?"

"She sounds OK. I'm sure she doesn't tell me everything. Did you talk to Konsta?”

“Filipa saw him when she was there. She told him we’ll repay the dowry if he lets Yesenya go. But he’s scared of that guy who tried to kill you.”

As soon as he hears the offer, Konsta’s mood brightens considerably. He’s beginning to suspect that Yesenya is never going to be his love bunny. Again and again he’s gone to see her, but she won't even look at him. Anyhow, she's too skinny.

This deal means Konsta can send Yesenya back to Echmash, but keep the dowry. New Start will give her a new one. That squares him with her family. The trick will be to get her off the mountain without Blago finding out. Blago blames him and Sejad for the embarrassment with Zimara's husband. It's not good to remind Blago of his mistakes. So Konsta needs to tread carefully.

In the meantime, he’ll ask for more money. Why shouldn’t they pay him a little extra? He’s heard of this New Start outfit, some kind of American corporation. It gives money to anyone with a sad story. Who can tell how much they would pay for this little girl Yesenya?

● Make Believe

At one point the Crusaders planned to install a satellite array atop the old church— in Sky Land itself. Then Sevik made his headquarters in the Tower of Penance, and had most of the electronic gear moved there. But there are still cables snaking across Sky Land rooftop, and half a dozen outlets ringing the dome, with those plastic snap covers.

The Skylanders are very careful not to show lights or make a lot of noise, so they don’t bother to bring big screens. But the little handgames are safe, and most days the Skylanders bring a couple to the roof. The Crusaders complain about their missing toys, accuse each other, and often end up in fistfights.

Nika gets the bright idea to set up a beauty shop, and brings stolen mirrors, hotcombs and hair dryers. (The One Trues have no objection to paint, pheremones and improbable sex costumery, so long as all displays are private. Pious men will often purchase dysfunctional underwear for their wives and daughters, or porn to show them what they want.) Taline immediately comes up with ideas to embellish the operation. After she posts pictures of the different cuts on offer, and tries to show Nika how to do the best one, Nika walks. Vlasta and Yesenya coax her back. Taline says, “I don’t want to be a beautician any more. How about I’m your number one customer?” So Nika gives her a fabulous if unsteady swirl, and Taline parades around Sky Land for an hour, head uncovered, and combs it out only as they leave to return to the Nunnery.

“I got better games,” Yesenya says one day. “Want to see?” She has brought the comm Filipa gave her, and scrolls through the screens. Back at the Nunnery she keeps the comm in a hole by the toilets, and has had no chance to learn all its features. She doesn’t even know what to look for. None of the girls do. But over the next few weeks they take turns experimenting. In some ways the comm is like a

TV, and in some ways like handgames, and in some ways like the murals inside the cathedral. The camera function fascinates Yesenya most. The first images she keeps are the kites in flight above them.

The girls learn to heed the battery signal. Fortunately, they can charge the comm from the old outlets on the roof. Yesenya slides the comm inside a sock and takes it with her almost every day.

Despite Filipa's warning, Yesenya tells the Skylanders about her sister and her cousin Zimara. "They're going to come get us, you'll see," Yesenya promises. The comm and the two women make her feel important.

The other Skylanders think she's kidding herself; who would dare take a girl from the man who owns her? But they are very kind and try to let her down easy.

"You know, it's OK if they don't come right away. We can live at Sky Land forever," Taline says.

Yesenya just smiles. She is sure Zimara will come for them all.

● Theological

The local bishop sends a stream of priests to the refugee camp. They hope to limit and repair the contamination by the likes of Doctor Avbury. Miryam is even worse: a local girl gone renegade. Avbury, who hugs no one, always greets the priests with a long embrace, and puts on a big feed.

One day Father Gregor hears about Zimara's first reading request. He comes round with a big smile. He wants to see this marvel for himself. "You can read, daughter?"

Evidently Zimara feels no kinship, does not answer. The priest figures she must be shy. Perhaps the other women have exaggerated her ability; how would they know? "Here, now, we can read the holy word together," he offers. He nods to the cardboard box under the cot. "Do you keep it here? Would you like me to get it?"

Zimara interposes a foot. "My stuff. Leave it alone."

"Of course." Gregor holds up his hands. "We can use mine." He reaches into a pocket of his tunic. As with all One Trues, even those who can't read, he carries scripture on a leaf rather than his comm. They all connect to the same servers, but the faithful like to keep a dedicated link, to separate sacred from profane. Father Gregor's leaf is particularly fancy, all burning hearts and bloody crowns of thorns. "Of course, I don't really need this." He taps his temple. He offers the leaf to Zimara. "Would you like to start, daughter?"

She taps her head, too, smiling grimly. "I know what it says. That's why I threw it out."

Father Gregor coughs and blinks his eyes. He shakes his head, as if dispersing a cloud of gnats. "I'm sorry. You threw out holy Scripture? Why would you do that?"

"I read it again to be sure I understand. To be sure the Crusaders have not been twisting the words around. It's just as I remembered. I didn't need it any more."

The priest is shocked. He dare not knock her down, not with all these other women watching. So he falls to his knees, eyes pressed shut, hands extended to heaven. He starts to bellow prayers in some ancient tongue. Zimara presses a finger to her lips, nods to the other women, and tiptoes around him. When he opens his eyes, Zimara has gone. The other women watch him stone-faced, waiting to see what he'll do.

Flushing, Father Gregor stands up and hurries away. As soon as he's out the door, he hears hoots and knee-slapping guffaws from the tent. Without recounting his humiliation, Gregor tells his bishop they've got to do something about the camp. That evening Gorj has a long comm with the Archbishop in exile.

Nagahry can only sympathize. "Wish I could help you. The camp is a whorehouse. But I'm told by my commanders that it has its uses, too. When the women come back home, they bring money from

New Start, did you know that? Plus we don't want a lot of refugees spilling into Europe. NATO would be sure to send in ground troops then. No, I'm sorry. For now we have to pray."

"Right, the money," says Bishop Gorj. "I'm glad you brought that up, Holy Joy. It seems to me that since the people of Saray have to put up with these harlots, it's only fair that we get a share of the resources. The cathedral, for instance, was heavily damaged by the mob— ". The liberals bled all over his front steps, and try as they might, failed to intercept all the army's bullets. Hundreds spattered instead the ornate facade, chipping pillars and stone saints.

Nagahry interrupts him. "Quite right. It's only fair. Tell you what, let me give you Brother Michael's code. This is his personal comm. Tell him your concern. I'm sure he will want to help."

Bishop Gorj is less certain. "I was hoping you would talk with him."

"No, no, I could never be as persuasive. Here, let me give you the code. I insist."

And Gorj keys in the code, but never uses it. Gives him the willies to even think about getting between Brother Michael and his money.

That evening, Doctor DesJarlais, a devout and sensitive man, finds Zimara after her shift at Intake. "I heard what you said to Gregor. Good for you. That guy is a jerk. But I also hope you're not missing the main message. You see, our religion is really about love. I understand you hate the hateful passages. I do too. But the Bible story is also full of life. It's part of our tradition. We can use the best parts, and refashion it. The slavery, the mass murders, that's only part of the story. God doesn't have to be a vindictive, controlling old man."

"All you have to do is rewrite God's book."

"Reinterpret. Understand it in the light of our current knowledge. Two thousand years ago they didn't have internet."

"Ah. Our new revelation."

"Not at all." He thinks how he should say this. "We keep our tradition. Tradition is important. But tradition grows up, just as we do."

"Sorry. I don't accept your story. Painting a flower on a gun does not turn the gun into a flower."

"I know there have been abuses. A lot of bad things. But think of the good the Church does. Comforting the poor, feeding the hungry. The shared sense of community."

"That's like saying the purpose of the army is parades."

The doctor waves a hand in frustration. "You want a better world? How can we possibly get there without the Word of God? Everything we know about justice comes from the Bible."

Zimara shakes her head in disbelief. "You need a book to tell you justice?"

DesJarlais makes himself smile. He presses a note into Zimara's hands, an online source about feminist theology, and hugs her.

It's a hard discussion, one that Zimara carries out over many months with many people. At one point Arasely, exasperated, says, "Who do you think you are? You think you can walk alone? The hero Zimara has some grand idea and the world is just going to kneel to your will? It's not your will. It's God's. We can't just stand by ourselves."

"Ask Blago about God's will," Zimara replies. "He'll tell you."

Arasely walks away, furious.

"And I don't walk alone," Zimara calls after her. "I walk with you."

Arasely doesn't look back. Later she has a somewhat different take. But it's a long process, often bitter.

● Onward Christian Soldiers

Another triumph for the Crusaders: they have conquered the city of Chernu Mos, a hundred stone and plaster homes by the Sungai River. There's a bridge there, too, an old stone monster dating back to the Moradzich counts, and that's what the Crusaders want. They also need some bodies. They plan to attack the airport at the provincial capital, and need a first wave of expendables to get through the wire. So after they kill the Jews and Muslims, the mayor and the teachers, after they burn the waterfront to give a clear line of fire from the bridge, they march off sixty eight men and boys, new zealots in the Lord's Army.

As usual, the NATO warplanes show up too late. Somehow, despite all NATO's electronic stealth measures, lately the Crusaders have shot down several of the planes, and the Saray government worries they are late to battle on purpose. Once the raiders get inside a town, it's too late to bomb them, for fear of killing civilians. The Crusaders know this and make sure to surround themselves with women and kids.

Plenty get away, though. They start to arrive at New Start six days later, trudging through a heavy rain. Rekady the driver organizes a caravan to fetch the old and the sick, who straggle out for miles into the hills. By now camp staff have seen so many such catastrophes that they've got well-established routines to deal with them. Everyone shifts into high gear. Even the older residents pitch in to make room for the newcomers.

Avbury is out of town at the moment, at some UN conference, so Mr. Mukherjee is in charge. He's been through it all before, in Myanmar and Congo and Syria, and he knows what to do. He makes sure Miryam uploads video of the Chernu Mos refugees staggering into camp, for Avbury to show her sponsors.

● Song of Miryam

Zimara asks Miryam, "Do you know the Song of Miryam?"

"I do. My mother loved that story."

"My cousin, she can recite the whole thing."

"Wild. In a book, it's like a hundred pages long."

"I know. After a couple hours we just made Yesenya shut up. She'd wait a minute, then start again, just to annoy us. But I still love that story. Could you find it for me?"

"I'll look."

The Song of Miryam is a very long poem, telling how the people of Rudeny were driven from their homes by mountain warlords, until the beautiful and cunning servant Miryam connives to set one against the other. The surviving killer is too weak and wounded to resist the peasant army that comes to rescue Miryam, under her lover's command. It may be the only traditional Rudeny tale with a happy ending. Zimara starts to use it in reading class.

● Spray Day

Wednesday is Spray Day. It's the easiest job for the clean-up crew, hosing down the barracks with clouds of pesticide. Not a lot of stooping, and no one can tell when they've missed a spot. But Vlasta notices Emrush starts coughing up nasty globs after they spray, and the tissues swell around his eyes. "What's in this stuff?" she asks Goranka.

"It kills rats and roaches. What do you think is in it?"

Taline tells Vlasta, "You'll have to leave Emrush outside."

Yesenya says, “Vyolka sprays our rooms every week. It’s like clouds.”

“So tell her to cut it out,” is Goranka’s advice.

The following Wednesday they wrap wet scarves across their faces, and spray the hell out of the soldiers’ barracks. They do it again Saturday.

“You just came by a couple days ago,” one of the boys complains.

“Stop bringing sweets into the barracks,” Nika tells him. “You guys are so dirty.” Before the month is out several warriors come down with a nasty cough, and so does Nika.

● Health Class

Doctors Nzangiye and Foost complain to Avbury. "What's with Zimara? She has a bunch of residents following us around. They've got little notebooks. They write things. It's annoying. They are in the way."

Avbury smiles a crooked smile. "I know the feeling. She's harmless, I assure you. I'll talk to her."

When Avbury asks, Zimara says, "It's just a project for our class. We try to write down what we see. We go back to class and we make a story about it. Everyone has something to tell. It's only an hour a day. We don't interfere."

"You should have asked."

"You're right. Tomorrow we will write a beautiful letter to the doctors."

"It's up to them, you know," Avbury tells her. "They don't want you around, you'll have to stop. The other residents may not want you to hear about their treatments."

"Is that how it is where you come from? Everyone lives in secret?"

"We are going to respect their wishes."

"By the way," Zimara wants to know, "Why are there no Rudeny doctors here?"

So Avbury confers with the med staff. They've got a handful of doctors for ten thousand men, women and children. The staff is growing, with new partnerships with hospitals across Europe, but most doctors stay only a few months. And each raid or battle brings scores or hundreds more ill and injured people to the camp.

There are no Rudeny doctors here because most have fled the country. The few that remain attend generals and gangsters, who surround them with bodyguards. The guards protect the precious doctors and make sure they don’t waste their skills on the undeserving.

There are all sorts of prevention issues New Start residents could help with. Administrators need someone to sample the water at every pump every day. They ought to re-survey the long term residents, and train the families who go back home. The latrines are a constant problem; they need to be redesigned and re-excavated.

Some of the doctors feel they've got enough on their hands, and don't want to fool with volunteers. But Nzangiye and a half dozen others agree to a little teaching experiment. They'll let Zimara's class tag along, and they'll take turns giving short lectures at night, about nutrition and sanitation, first aid and infant care. They enlist Miryam to translate.

She suggests, "Do the lectures at supper— more will have a chance to hear. We can hang a couple flexscreens so you can show charts."

When Nzangiye brings it up to Zimara, she stipulates, "Everyone who attends ten lectures, we'll give them a paper, yes? 'Arasely Solay of Echmash has completed the New Start Nutrition Class.' With a picture of flowers on the side.”

“Vegetables,” Arasely amends. “Beautiful peas and squash and eggplant.”

Zimara likes the idea. “And you should think how you can use us to help in the camp."

● Puppies

Little Fyodor tries to beg off the Kingdom action at the school. He's the new kid on the squad, dragooned in from the raid on Chernu Mos. When he joined the Crusade, he figured he'd sort of ease into mass murder. You know, start small, do a couple practice runs. "Mom's been feeling poorly. I thought I'd head back home, take care of her a few days, see that she takes her medicine. Then I'll be right back."

Blago narrows his eyes, jerks back his head. "So you're going to run out on us. We're going to risk our lives, at the heart of the beast, and you'll be home cuddling with mama. That what you're saying? You miserable chickenshit."

"No, I . . . ."

"I don't want to hear your disgusting excuses. Konsta, you brought this guy to us. This is your pal, your buddy?"

"Just a guy," Konsta protests. "His mom was my mom's cousin, or so he says. I never met him before last week."

"You better talk some sense into him." With a well-practiced glare at Fyodor, Blago adds, "Hell, I don't think this kid has got what it takes to be a Crusader. Go home, then, little Fyodor. We don't want cowards here." Blago turns on his heels and leaves the group.

Konsta knows very well Blago's policy with deserters. Earnestly, he recites, "Jesus said, unless you leave your mother and father, you cannot come with Me. You got to give up your family. You want to get to Heaven, don't you?" With no close family himself —there was that messy mishap early in the war— he finds this a particularly comforting argument.

"Sure. But I got to take care of my mom, don't I? Besides," Fyodor scrapes some gravel with the toe of his boot, "maybe there's some little Christians at the school."

Mikchr knows the answer to that one. "Scripture says, 'For Your sake we killed all day long'. Som 44. Doesn't say anything about Christians."

"Som 44! Som 44!" the others jeer. They're sick of the little bible spouter. They suspect he makes it up. They can't check because they can't read.

It's Turdowak who offers the clincher: "God knows his own. That's what Doctor Sevik says. You should be glad. If they're One Trues, you're sending them to Heaven. When you get there, they'll be waiting with loving arms."

Fyodor ponders that wisdom until Blago returns.

"Are we good?" their leader inquires. "All right! We're so happy that you're coming with us, Fyodor. Tell you what. You know, after Kingdom actions, I usually pick someone to take the ears."

"The ears?"

"Yeah, yeah, the ears. Ears of the betrayers, the devils. We got a freezer full, don't we, boys? So this time, Fyodor, I want you to take the ears."

"I don't know. I never done that before."

"It's easy. I'll show you how." Blago drapes an arm over Fyodor's shoulder.

Ever seen a puppy beaten and then hugged? Fyodor's uncertain smile says that he'll take a beating ten times over, so long as in the end his commander holds him like he's doing now. What a swell bunch of fellas. Band a brothers.

● Diabolical

Couple of days in a row some of the women are missing from reading class. When Zimara asks around, Mandelika explains nonchalantly, “O, they’re caught up in this Muslim thing. You know, they want Avbury to build them a mosque.”

“What does that have to do with reading class?”

Mandalika shrugs. “Maybe one of the other women said something.”

Zimara’s face darkens. “Who?”

“Maybe a couple women said something. Why should the Muslims get a mosque? They’re not Christians.”

“Why not? We have our chapels.”

“That’s different.”

“How is it different?’

“The Muslims, that’s Satan’s religion.”

Zimara heads to Avbury straightaway. “You’ve got to do something about this. Some of the residents are complaining about the Muslims.”

Avbury looks at her cooly. “That’s right. They’re asking for a prayer room. An outrage— is that what you want to say?”

Zimara’s brows draw together. “Of course not. You’ve got to tell residents to treat the Muslims fairly.”

“I don’t have to do anything. It’s up to the Residents’ Council. They meet again next week.”

Zimara protests, “This is serious! You can’t leave it up to them!”

“You got something to say, say it at Council.”

● Supply and Demand

Filipa reports that Yesenya is healthy, and secretive.

“What about Konsta?” Zimara asks.

“I’ve had no word. You said there’s a woman at New Start who has been talking with him.”

Negotiations with Konsta aren't going so well. Since she won’t talk to him, won’t even look at him, Konsta has cooled considerably his ardor for Yesenya. There are plenty of other girls and women in Hidris, with discounts for Crusaders. So he’s having second thoughts about this whole marriage business.

But Miryam’s messengers don’t know that, and Konsta decides to play it cagy. New Start offers to repay Yesenya’s dowry. Why not double, or triple? He threatens to marry the girl next month, or next week. Crazy people throwing money away for eleven-year-olds, who knows what a slick businessman like himself might be able to extort. For the Crusaders, New Start camp is like an ATM. Whenever they're low on cash, they can always kidnap someone and get Avbury to cough up more. Otherwise they would have burned the camp long ago. So Konsta holds out, while visions of sugar plums dance in his head.

Avbury pushes back. She can’t let Konsta jack up the price for everyone. Zimara understands this, but reminds the doctor: "Don't forget us."

"I don't forget. I wish I could."

● Bon Voyage

Arasely is going home. All the payments have been made, squeaky hinges greased, all crimes plastered over if not forgotten. The women decide to have a farewell party the night before.

They have built a little pavilion, and tacked to it Arasely's pictures of her kids. They've scavenged this and that from the commissary, to fashion little cakes and stuffed rolls. Zimara and others from the mask class have made Farewell and Come Back masks, and hung them from the columns. Avbury contributes the beer and the loudspeaker. Turns out there's a little string band among the staff, who are thrilled at the chance for their first public performance. As the evening proceeds, they share their instruments with the residents, who give the music an edge. In a couple hours half the camp is clapping and singing.

Arasely sits in the pavilion with her best pals, a dopy grin on her lean dark face. Avbury shows up in an embroidered skirt, red and gold and emerald in ancient patterns, and joins the dance.

Zimara sits awkwardly by the corner of a tent. She sings and claps, long spatulate fingers flashing in the lantern light. But her shoulders are hunched, her movements narrow. She sits by herself. Avbury spots her, and leans over to say something to Arasely. Arasely nods, eyes shining, and steps down from the pavilion and through the crowd.

"You know," she says as she kneels by Zimara's side, "first thing after I see my kids I'll go see Gret and Aloyzi. I'll talk to Yorg. You'll see— soon you'll be home with us. Now, come, dance with us. Be happy for me." She reaches for Zimara's hands, and leads her to the ring of dancers.

Zimara starts slowly, shuffling —her broken body hurts yet— but little by little her movements get looser, freer. Zimara dances with her eyes closed, tears streaming down her face. Arasely, behind her, cries as well, and smiles and sings.

The women dance and talk till morning. Rekady drives the jeep up at first light. Arasely has one canvass bag the camp gave her, and a plastic bag full of gifts from the other women. Someday soon Rekady will come for each of them. Arasely waves until she's out of sight.

● A Deal’s a Deal

Zimara wants Filipa’s husband to lean on Konsta. These marriages are always about long-term alliances. If Todor looks like he’s backing away from the deal for Yesenya, the girl won’t be of much use to Konsta. Zimara has asked Arasely to carry a message.

When Todor hears who sent the note, he strikes it from Arasely’s hand and spits on it. "Tell that bitch to die already."

Hearing this, Yesenya’s sister stops crying. She measures Todor with her eyes. She won’t cry again for a while. As Arasely strides away grim-faced, Filipa manages to press a note into her palm for Zimara.

● Deal’s Off

The day before the meet, Yorg calls Miryam. "Listen, I’m not coming to your camp. I'm afraid you'll have Kut's men waiting for me. I can't risk it." Instead, he's going to bring the kids to Saray. "You bring the money, and you bring Zimara. I'll call at ten, and tell you where to go. No one else."

Miryam talks it over with the Doctor and Zimara. Khamzat, Avbury's chief of security, thinks it's OK. "He's got reason to worry about coming here. We know Saray. We can have a couple guys follow you, just in case. He won't see them."

But Yorg calls back, an hour later, from a different comm. "The deal's off. Tell Zimara, Stay away from Saray. I won't be there."

"Let me talk to him," Zimara demands. They all listen in.

"What are you doing, Yorg? I want you to bring my children!"

"Zee? Zimara, you can't go to Saray."

"What are you talking about?"

"Blago, he told me to stay home. He said he'd take care of it."

"I don't care. I'm coming to get the kids. I don't care who brings them."

"The kids are not coming."

"What do you mean? Where are my kids?"

"I sent them away."

"Are you crazy?"

"Listen! You never listen. Blago's going. The kids are not. You can't go." Zimara doesn't know what to say.

Avbury reaches for the comm, but now the link is dead. Zimara has her fists in her mouth. Avbury wraps her arms around Zimara. "We'll get your kids."

Zimara pushes away. "Give me the money. I'll go. I'm not afraid of fucking Blago."

"Don't you get it? Your kids are not coming. Blago will come for the money, and to finish what he started with you. We don't even know where your kids are."

"You have to let me do this."

"I don't have to let you do anything. I'm doing what I have to do." The doctor thumbs the comm but Zimara grabs her arm.

"Zimara, what are you doing?" Avbury gestures to her security chief.

Khamzat says, "Sounds like that guy just saved your life."

Avbury tells him, "I think so too. Call Kut. Tell him we've got a Crusader captain coming to town."

The doctor pockets her comm and faces Zimara.

Arasely is saying something but Zimara just shakes her head. "Give me the money," she demands. "I'll go to Echmash myself. I'll find Yorg and I'll get Aloyzi and Gret."

"I'm not going to let you travel into Crusader territory with a thousand riyal in your pocket. Echmash is well behind the battlefront. Your kids should be safe for now. I'm not going to put you in danger, and I'm not going to jeopardize the work we're doing with all these other women."

"You have to help!"

"I can't fix your shitty country!" Avbury shouts.

Zimara flinches. After a minute, she says,"Then what are you here for? This is your job."

"On the contrary," the doctor points, "it's your job. Your country, you fix it." She walks away before she says more.

Zimara calls after her. "What can I do? Tell me what to do and I'll do it."

Avbury stops and turns for a moment. "Exactly. What can you do?" The wave of her hand takes in all the women watching. Then she stalks off.

Miryam catches up with her, takes her arm. "What the hell was that? You have no right to talk like that to the residents."

It takes Avbury several strides before she can speak. "I agree. I'm ashamed. There's something about that woman."

"She's maddening. It's not her fault."

Avbury shakes her head. "It's more than that. She . . . I want her to understand." Avbury raises her eyes to Miryam's. "Do you know?"

Miryam nods. "Yes, I know. But it's not fair to her."

Avbury turns right around and marches back to Zimara, who won't look at her at first.

"I apologize. It's not your fault, all this . . . " she searches for the word, but there's no word that can convey her fear and fury. Avbury says, "No one can fix it by by herself."

Zimara raises her eyes. "Someone has to start."

"Yes. Not you, not today."

Kut never does get his hands on Blago. The Crusader gets into a shootout with government troops at the Sungai River, never makes it to Saray. He leaves four soldiers and a couple Crusaders lying in the dirt. When he hears about it, Yorg is disappointed, too.

● Parade Drill

Corporal Nudzh tries to do the right thing. Every day he drills his men outside the old brewery and every day they complain.

"Give us a haji, then we'll practice."

"What a suck-up, Nudzh. Leave us alone."

He threatens to tell Captain Skhrote, but they know Skhrote doesn't care. Nudzh badgers them into a column but they are slow and sloppy.

The Skylanders walk by one day, clicking and clanking their mops and buckets. Taline calls out, "You call yourselves soldiers? Straighten up! Take some pride!" She shoulders the mop, sticks out her chest, and struts across the courtyard. Her troops fall in behind her. They turn at the end of the yard and march back.

"Too close," Nika mutters, but Taline doesn't care. She goose-steps up to the corporal, does a crisp about face under his nose, and starts to march away. He scythes the butt of his rifle at the back of her head, hard as he can. The mopstick catches part of the blow, but Taline falls like an ox under the hammer. The Crusaders laugh, except for Nudzh. He bends over Taline, rifle raised, ready to smash again. Yesenya runs and kneels between the corporal and the Queen of Sea and Sky. Yesenya tugs until Taline turns over. Taline blinks hard and gets up, blood streaming down her neck and shoulders. She snaps the mops back into place, and marches off, weaving a little. Yesenya, Nika and Vlasta march smartly after her.

● Petition

The Residents' Council used to be half men, but several bailed when they realized that Avbury listens to the women, too. Now it's three men and ten women. The one Muslim guy on the Council doesn't show up today. Maybe he got nervous. The crowd is noisy, agitated.

Muslims make up nearly a third of the camp residents, but up to now have had no place to pray together. The Christians have four chapel sites, for each of the four main Christian sects here. Now the Muslims have petitioned to set up a prayer room in one of the shelters by the gates. It looks like the Christians have found unity at last. They can't bear this affront to their . . . whatever, it's an affront in any case. An insult, a betrayal. They'll burn down the prayer house. They'll burn down the Muslims.

Not everyone is so adamant. "Don't worry," one woman says, fanning herself with the flap from a cardboard box. "Avbury is American. She'll never allow it."

Half a dozen Muslim men and women come to the Residents' Council meeting. They stand in front, facing the Council table. They are surrounded by a grim and restless crowd of Christians. Avbury arrives at the last minute —she's been conferring with security— and stands by the shelter wall in the back. Miryam, Mukherjee, Nzangiye and the rest of the staff, everyone not on duty, have also crammed into the hall. They keep silent while the Muslim residents speak.

A woman named Setareh addresses the Council. “You have seen our letter. You told us last time you would decide tonight. Please let us have a place to gather and pray.” Nikolin, the Council chair, treats it all very matter of factly (as she and Avbury had discussed that morning), asking questions about where and when, how big a place the Muslims need. One of the other councillors asks Mukherjee if the site by the gates is suitable. A third says he thinks it makes sense. The fourth says with ill grace, “Let’s get it over with. The government’s just going to make us do it anyway.”

The crowd seems unpersuaded. One man says, “Why do they have to put it in the front of the camp? They can go to the mosque in Saray. I feel they’re forcing their religion on me.”

Father Gregor gets up to speak, but Nikolin says, “Sorry, Father, this is for camp staff and residents.”

The next man complains, “The Muslims are always complaining. We’ve given them all this food and medicine. They should be content with that. They should shut up or go back where they came from.”

Zimara knows this Teobald. He’s a landlord and usurer, and he has given her an opening. She raises her hand. She has to clear her throat; it’s a strain for her to speak loudly.

“Uncle Teobald, you know we are all grateful for this food and medicine you have given us. Among tenant farmers in the Zalman Valley, your generosity is legendary. Even, may I say, mythical.” The listeners laugh; they know him too. “And many people say what you just said. Last week I saw on the news broadcast, a leader of the Assembly in Saray, a big man, lovely hair, he made just the same point. What are you complaining about? You should be grateful. You don’t like it here, go back where you came from.

“He was talking about us. All of us refugees. The ugly, stupid people. Dirty. They don’t want us to bleed on their fine carpets.”

She points. “You. You. You know what they think of us. Is it true? Or is it a lie? Are we shit to be scraped off their boots? Or are we the same as them?

“These men and women ask for no more than what the rest of us have already. A place to pray. Same as what we have. You want to deny them a place to pray?

“My sisters and brothers. I come from Echmash. It’s a little place not far from Obeyyed, maybe you know it. We used to have Muslim neighbors, and an Anabaptist man. Now there are none. You know what happened to them. Same thing that happened to us, only worse. We watched —I watched— and did nothing. I thought it could never happen to me.

“I didn’t stand with my neighbors before. Jheera and Malkhop and the rest. Now I do, with these my new neighbors.”

She walks across the room, to stand with the petitioners. Mandalika is there; she joins Zimara. Without taking her eyes off the Councillors, Zimara reaches her hand to Mandalika’s and squeezes it. Miryam makes her way through the crowd. Some people start leaving through the back. Most stay. More come to stand with the Muslims. Avbury stands in the back, smoking and watching.

The councillors relax a little and resume their bureaucratic drone. Who will get the building materials? Do they need some kind of sound system? Do they need some provision for extra foot traffic? The councillors approve the prayer room and move onto the next item. More people file out.

As they walk into the night, Zimara asks Avbury, “Would you have stepped in if hadn’t turned out right?”

“I was worried. I also know there are some good people on the Council.”

“They wanted you to decide, so they wouldn’t have to.”

“Of course. But I’m not going to let them take all the easy tasks, the praise tasks, and leave the hard work to me. They need to take responsibility."

"If I were director, I don't think I could have been that patient."

"Depends on what you want. I could have made that decision. Then there’d be no discussion. You wouldn’t have said what you did. And maybe later on, in a few days or weeks, someone would burn

down the prayer room. Now I think it will be OK. Because you, all of you, saw that allowing them that was the right thing."

Thinking about it later, Avbury finds it interesting that Zimara should imagine herself, even for a moment, in the director's position.

● Distress Call

"I don't like it here," Yesenya says. She's crying into the comm.
"What happened?" Zimara has never heard her cousin so distressed. "Is it Konsta?"
"Konsta's a jerk. They're all jerks."
"What happened? Are you all right?"
"It's all wrong here. Zimara, I want to go home." Yesenya taps End.

● Arasely Returns

Arasely's back. She walks to the gate like an old woman, head bowed, clutching the scarf over her face. Her husband told her, "I want it the same."

"Of course," she said, and promised to do better. But she's not the same. Her husband complained to the priest, who was already worried that Arasely would taint the other women.

"You must leave," he told her. "This village is only for Christians."

"I am a Christian," she protested.

"You are a snake, sent by Satan," he corrects. So now she's back at the camp. They kept her sons.

The other women make way for her, silent. Her smashed hopes are theirs.

When they're alone, Zimara asks, "And my kids? Did you see my kids?"

Arasely wipes her tears. "They're gone. Filipa told me. They're in Kulkhiz."

"Kulkhiz! Does he hate me so much?"

"It wasn't Yorg who sent them, it was Blago. Filipa says Yorg owed Blago some money. He sold Gret and her brother to a carpet mill . . . . Look, they're safe, they're OK, we'll find them."

"Sure," Zimara says. She lets Arasely mother her a moment; maybe this way, ever so briefly, Arasely can put aside her own anguish.

● Repurpose

Arasely shakes Miryam awake. "Please! Come now!"

Miryam sits up, rubs her eyes and cheeks. She pulls on her jeans, and follows Arasely to the residents' shelter. Brilliant stars tonight. It's just past four.

Zimara has set a kerosene lamp before the mirror in the open-air shower. She's taken off her shirt and scarf, and is busily carving away at her face. Blood gushes down her neck and breasts and belly. The other women watch aghast, but when they approach, Zimara waves them away with the kitchen knife. "Couple minutes, yes?" she says. She cocks her head this way and that in the mirror. It drips with splatter. She wipes her face with a towel —it gives her a couple seconds to consider her work— then she has to wipe again. When she sees Miryam pushing through the throng, she has only to raise the knife and give Miryam a look the translator has never seen before. Miryam backs out to fetch Nzangiye.

When they return the knife and towel are in a bucket, and Zimara is in the shower. When she comes out she lets Nzangiye clean her face. At first they're sure she's chopped out the crucifix, but in the days

to come it becomes clear she has only redesigned it. Now there's a ragged zeta emerging from her ruined face. The women nod: "Zimara."

Avbury is almost —almost— in tears with frustration. She is not used to seeing her projects thwarted. She tells Miryam, "I thought we were getting somewhere with Zimara. We were going to fix her face. We were going to do it. Now she can never go back."

"But we knew that already, didn't we?" Miryam pauses, taps her own cheek. "Remember she said she wanted to die? I think now she has a different idea, and these are the terms she has laid down. She has chosen to live and not forget."

When next they see Zimara, she's at class with her reading students. Half her head is packed in bandages. She smiles with half her mouth, as the others recite their ABCs.

§ BORDERS

● Entrepreneur

Zimara collects some money from the other women, puts on her best clothes, and bums a ride from Rekady.

"I hear you've got quite a roll. Why don't you buy me supper?" he says.

"If there's any left after my business, I'll buy you some *slotchna."* Zimara slurs some words, because the muscles on one side of her jaw don't work right.

"What do you need? Maybe I can get it for you cheaper."

"It's a service, and you can't."

Rekady's mouth quirks a bit, but he holds his tongue and keeps driving.

At this Zimara covers her mouth because she's smiling, too, just a bit. She has no experience with flirting, and no intention to do so. But she recognizes the impulse in herself, faint as the brush of Aloyzi's eyelash against her cheek.

Rekady drops her off in the old city. She takes an alley to the river. A row of three and four story shops and warehouses snakes along the trash-strewn waterfront. Speedboats bob in stone shelters. You don't want to go out the streetside door, the roofs and river offer options.

She checks the address on a card. Movement on the top floor, the glint of maybe binoculars. Meat pie on the landing, spilling over at the edges, wants to know her intent.

"I've come to see Madame Bryony."

"Got your invite?"

"Of course. But the comm fucked up. Sorry." She holds up a busted device.

"Who sent you?"

Zimara names an asshole, well known in the carrying trade.

"Pembol?" the guy says with a skeptical smile.

"I asked him for a job. He said I should see Madame Bryony."

Cerberus drops his eyes, shakes his head minutely, and turns just a bit, to talk through the headset. "Grandmother," he says, but Zimara doesn't hear the rest of it. He taps the ear bud twice, watching her. He raises his arms to show Zimara what to do, and pats her down. She curses inadvertently when he runs his hand over the bandage on her face and pinches it. Then he steps aside, cocking his head toward the door. "Go on in."

Past the heavy warehouse door she finds narrow blind corridors, overhead mirrors, and partitions that do not extend to the ceiling; old tech. After all, cameras can be hacked, then everyone knows your business. An anteroom at the end of the hallway with couches, bright rugs, sweets and flowers on a dark table carved with mythical beasts. A man sits by a door thumbing his comm. Big hair and a headset. He does not look up.

Zimara raps on the door and gets invited in.

A wide window opens out on the river. To the right, a woman sits behind a massive desk. Wide lips, brown spotted skin, cheeks rouged so heavily the wrinkles radiate like fine red-sprayed fractures on a face-dented windshield. An elaborate headpiece inset with tin, glass and serpentene caps roughcut gray hair. Layers of pink and orange drape a froglike body. As Bryony gestures with her hand, the rings sparkle and clack. She has painted her fingernails maroon, the color of blood at sunset.

Madame Bryony speaks with an accent Zimara cannot quite place. She runs the local office of the Reach, the upgraded version of the continental mafia. Serbs, Syrians, Chechens, Corsicans, Irish, Berbers, Basques— the periphery reaching into the heart of west Europe. The days of the exclusive old ethnic mob are over, as her late husband learned too late. Bryony herself is more adaptable.

"So?"

"I want work."

"Clearly not as a whore— no longer, at any rate. What happened to you?"

"Boyfriend."

"Ever been to the EU?"

"No."

Bryony taps her teeth with a stylus. "Sure, you can do the refugee bit. Carry something to a man on the other side, he'll give you 6,000 riyal. Stay there if you want. Or you can fix up your face, come back, and do it again. Then I pay you 10,000. Sound fair? But five times," she holds up her hand, "I run people five times, no more. We can mask you on their databases, but not forever. Then I lose a package, and you go to jail. Belgium, OK. Hungary, no good."

"I was thinking more of Kulkhiz. I could carry to Kulkhiz."

The gangster looks up sharply. "We don't send women to Kulkhiz. It's not safe."

Zimara spreads her palms. "You need carriers. I need work."

Bryony pushes back from the desk, examines Zimara closely. "Let's see the face."

"Bit of a mess."

"Let's see."

Zimara peels off one side of the bandage, painfully, and turns so Bryony can see.

The gangster whistles. Zimara's face is still a mass of broken bloody crust. Bryony can't make out the zeta —she's not looking for it— but she has seen this kind of injury once or twice before. "I'm not working with you. Go back the way you came."

Zimara stays where she is. "I live at the camp. I'll do anything to get out."

Bryony waves her hand impatiently. "Do it somewhere else."

Zimara hesitates. Still staring at the gangster, Zimara carefully tapes the bandage down again and turns to leave. As she opens the door, though, Bryony has one more question.

"Country girl." Bryony points a chin at Zimara's injury. "I ask you again. How did you get that?"

"They took my cousin."

"Ah. And you got in the way. Tell me, did you have a knife? A gun? Then you're a halfwit. An entertainer. Yes, you just gave them a few minutes fun. I don't want you here."

"Sounds like you know the experience."

"I know nothing about it."

"I won't call you a liar." They glare at each other.

"Sit down," Bryony commands. Zimara sits. "I suppose this cousin stays in Kulkhiz now."

Zimara hesitates, nods. "Hidris."

"Naturally. Do you even know she's alive?"

"Yes. I sent her a comm."

"That's one good move at least. So you want my crew to take you on your private business. And when you get there you'll cheat me, isn't that right? You'll use my pass to get in and out, maybe take this cousin— and then they'll come after *me."*

"Maybe there's a better way. You can advise me."

"You would have to know who's holding her, what the routines are."

"That's what I'm going to find out."

"Most of the women there are not under such tight security. But the Crusaders just pick them up again when they get back home. If she's been earning for them, they'll hurt her."

"She won't go back. She'll come with me."

"How are you going to get her over the wall?"

"It's a fence. Where she stays, it's a fence."

"Not to mention checkpoints at the border, and at the front line."

"But you know how to do these things." Zimara waves her hand impatiently, and tugs at her jacket. "This jacket. I made it. It's nice, isn't it? Or it used to be. I made jackets for Christmas money. How

it started, I made one for my husband, very nice, and one of my neighbors wanted one, so I made one for her, and she paid me. Then more people wanted my jackets. You think my cousin is the only girl whose family wants to get her out of Hidris? You and me, we could start a nice little business."

"You and me?"

"Let me go with your crew. It's a very small investment for you."

"An investment is something that pays me back." Bryony pulls open a drawer, takes out tobacco and papers. She extends them to Zimara, who shakes her head. While she rolls the cigarette, the gangster asks, "How much money do you have?"

"One hundred twelve riyal."

Bryony closes her eyes a moment and shakes her head. She sprinkles some powder from a vial onto the tobacco. Then she lights up, takes a long hit, and blows the plume toward Zimara. Zimara blinks her eyes. Bryony gets up and walks round the desk. She puts out her hand: "Give me one hundred." Bryony tucks the money into her vest. She extends a finger to Zimara's cheek. "Keep it patched up, and stick to the boyfriend story. The soldier boys will recognize it, like dogs sniffing at a lamppost. I've got a crew starting for Hidris in two nights. They'll leave from a warehouse on Avenue Sanski. You know it?" Zimara nods. "And here." Bryony scrounges in her desk, retrieves a twist of holo and scribbles something on it. She passes it across the desk. "Find yourself alone at a checkpoint, see if this works." It's not her holo; it's a competitor's.

Zimara takes the holo and stands. "One more thing."

"Do I look like your mother? No more advice. Not for a lousy hundred riyal."

"You're right about the gun. Do you have a gun?"

"Do you have money?"

"You have my money."

"I have *my* money."

Zimara doesn't budge. She stands there, biting her lip. They stare at each other for a while.

"You probably don't even know how to shoot."

"How hard can it be?"

Bryony takes another long hit of the cigarette. Then she fumbles in her sash, puts a little pistol on the desk. "This is a happy gun for me. I want it back."

"I'll bring it back." Zimara reaches for it.

Bryony closes her fist over Zimara's and holds it to the desk.

"If they search you, you might as well shoot. They'll kill you anyway."

Zimara understands. "How many bullets?"

"This little thing? Five only. The first one is free."

Zimara withdraws her hand. She props her boot on the chair, packs the gun into it. "Then I promise to be economical."

"By the way."

Zimara waits in the doorway.

"Your pal Pembol?"

"Yes."

"No one has seen Pembol for nearly a year."

Zimara considers this. "Must have met with some misfortune," she concludes.

"Serious misfortune," Bryony says. "If you get back, leave a number. Couple of months, maybe I can use you."

"I'll keep it in mind," Zimara tells her.

Twelve riyal is enough to buy Rekady some mutton stew and a spill of brandy. Zimara sticks to just the brandy.

"Not hungry?" he asks.

She shakes her head. He shrugs and shovels. “Not bad.” He offers her the spoon. “Come on. Don’t worry. This is not a date.”

Zimara hesitates, then takes the spoon gratefully. She is really hungry.

● Kingdom Come

Zimara wakes to a misty dawn. There are four men in the van. Pavl is the crew chief, Henrik the driver. They all stink of sweat and smoke and garlic; Zimara, too. She rolls into the others with every curve. The gun in her boot bruises her calf.

Outside, a blasted landscape. The plateau is the heart of Rudeny— rich soil, plenty of water, a sturdy peasantry. Now all Zimara sees is scene after scene of burning farms and gutted villages. Shattered stumps of trees. The Crusaders range far from their bases; where they can’t hold territory for leisurely despoliation, they like to terrorize. The flood of refugees chokes government services, making people lose faith in democracy all the more quickly. The raiders are especially active along this highway, because they like to bring along their artillery.

Here’s how the Crusade goes, if it’s a Muslim village: The soldiers surround the place suddenly, at night, and bombard it. Pound the hell out of it with shells and rockets. The idea is to force the residents to run. Then the boys machinegun the villagers as they stream out by roads and paths. The death squads go in after dawn, searching house by house. Then the trucks back down the narrow alleys.

The boys always bring along one or two to load up whatever strikes their fancy. Some of these peasants are surprisingly well-off. They have screens, e-games, farm tools, traditional carpets, hand-stitched clothing, marriage dresses sewn with coins, lovely furniture their grandparents carved. The women still wear their life savings: gold and silver rings, necklaces, anklets . . . . “An ax and a sack” is what the Crusaders call their treasure hunts. Last couple years there’s been a big boom (as it were) in the market for eastern antiques and handicrafts. Eurozone collectors are snapping up heirlooms at closing-sale prices.

When they can fit no more, the trucks trundle off and the Crusaders start setting fires. Soon the homes are all ablaze. They go after the bigger structures with explosives— temples, mosques, Anabaptist churches; shops; mausoleums. Lyrical as ever, Brother Michael likes to put it this way: “Centuries ago our forefathers burned the savage wilderness to make way for farms. The ashes of that wasteland became fertilizer for their crops. We too bring cleansing fire!”

It’s kind of stupid, because a few weeks later the Crusaders come back with their families. A handful at first— pioneers, you might say, in this new wilderness. They set up tents and then shacks. They dig gardens and put up fences for the pigs. When the Crusade takes the capital, they believe, God’s government will build them fine homes on the land they have liberated from the infidel.

Sometimes, during these attacks, the Crusaders choose to leave a few people alive. For instance, they might make a mom choose which of her children must die, and let the others go. They do this because after two years of murder, they’re bored. They are passionate about their work, real artists; they don’t want it to become just another chore. So they change it up a little, every day some new little twist, so to speak, to put the fun back in, like an old married couple trying sex toys. Killing should not be routine. For the truly dedicated, murder is something you do because you can and you want to. So sometimes, because they can, they also let people go. The spice of life, and all that.

Less room for creativity with the One True settlements. Crusaders surround the village at night. In the morning they send in the squads. Usually they already have a list of names— if he didn’t provide the list in the first place, the mayor’s name goes at the top. The Crusaders round up whichever heretics did not flee long ago, and the teachers, and the health service people (really, anyone connected with the government) and take over their homes and shops.

Retribution day, that first bright morning of the Millenium. Clear out the unbelievers. Normally the invaders don't pull the triggers themselves, except maybe once or twice, by way of example. Instead they like to recruit local boys to do the shooting and chopping and burning, in the public square. Engineering complicity is the Crusaders' most effective weapon by far. They figure a man who has murdered his neighbor is lost to the democratic movement. Even more important, it saves the cost of mission work. This way Crusaders don't have to explain their holy purpose. Their new accomplices, hands sticky with the blood of children, are more than eager to proclaim: "The Will of God!"

At an after-party Doctor Sevik once joked, "When they slaughtered the buffalo, the Red Indians chopped it up and made use of every part: flesh, guts, tendons, brains, horn, hooves, hide . . . when we take a villager, we do them one better: we flay his very soul."

For the surviving prey, interrogations and extortions. The soldiers set up in the mayor's office, and call in the residents, one by one. They ask about the neighbors: Who is a One True, who's faking it, and who works for the government? But at this point what they really want to know is: Who has got some silverware buried in the back yard? Who has a few riyal stashed in a bank in the capital? — which is to ask, Who are the best candidates for kidnapping? Quite an enterprise, this holy war; someone should write it up for a business journal.

Finally they assemble everyone at the church, where the priest anoints the new mayor, a pious man, with a few thugs to keep him company. Outside the village, the Crusaders post a sign. "Kingdom of God," it says, under bloody crossed swords. In smaller type the verse from 2 Chronicles: "Are you not our God, who drove out the inhabitants of this land and gave it to the seed of Abraham?" They have had hundreds printed.

This is what Zimara learns on her travels, and from what she saw at Echmash, and what she sees in the days ahead. She tries to make sense of the whole thing. Where did these perverts come from? How did they take half her country?

Crusader units are based on clans and villages. Up to a hundred soldiers coagulate around a core of ex-Army officers and non-coms. For the commanders, there's a tension between having a powerful unit with many men, and having to share out the plunder among too many hands. So the officers, almost always ex-military, prefer to recruit a lean permanent staff from their own clans and villages, and then beef up with expendable part-timers —Konsta is one of these— for big assaults.

Naturally, the clans don't always get along one with another. Sometimes their rivalries go back centuries. This suits Nagahry and Michael just fine; this way they don't worry much about subordinates combining against them. They keep control by Brother Michael's rigorous training regime for the officers; the attentions of Sevik's spies and torturers; and the unifying force of constant religious ritual. All of it makes for a flexible, cohesive, skilled, motivated leadership, focussed on the external enemy and the promise of power.

The rank and file are a little more crumbly. They get restless without regular feedings of money and blood— and here's the thing: some of it has to be their own. Yes, the occasional risk of martyrdom adds just the right dash of self-righteousness to the plain fare of mass murder. These are strange people indeed. Zimara feels like she's looking through a microscope at some foul gangrene.

A frantic honking startles her. There's a green and white pickup behind them, rattling like pebbles in a beer can, swerving wildly. Without haste the men in the van reach for their guns. The pickup zooms to the left, a man bent over the wheel, his eyes not quite focussed. Two small heads look out the side window as they speed by. The little truck is piled high with furniture. Something's loose on top, and sways with every curve. They see it's a woman, dressed in Sunday clothes and tied to a chair wedged among satchels and a mattress. She flops about loosely, dark hair undone. Her skirt flaps in the wind, revealing fat white legs.

"Damn," says Pavl. "That fucker up there is driving a dead woman." Henrik leans on the horn, but the pickup never slows or wavers. "She's gonna go," says Pavl, and sure enough, the body slips loose and starts to slide, launches into the air as the pickup hits a pothole. Henrik brakes, but not quickly enough to avoid a heavy punch to the front grill. Ahead, the little Toyota keeps going. So does the van. "Bang the horn," Pavl suggests, but Henrik shakes his head: "They're better off without her."

Pavl has some business in a small town nearby, so they turn off the main road. They have to slow down to cross the bridge— now just a few planks over an iron frame. The town is quiet. Henrik maneuvers around debris and bodies in the streets; the busy dogs hardly notice; maybe, as with people, bingeing relieves their stress too. Comfort food.

The van passes an old gent plunked down on a curb outside a burned out shop. He wears one of those old-timey suits, black string tie and pork pie hat, all very dusty. His family was in the shop when the Crusaders came by. He came too late. He wants to join them.

Henrik parks at the market just down the street. People are still buying and selling, whatever the soldiers didn't take. Not the best selection. A woman sits on a blanket, her merchandise around her: children's shoes, family photos in nice frames, a box of broken light bulbs. Who would buy this stuff? But it's all she has. Pavl enters one of the sheds back of the market. The others of the crew stand or squat by the van, smoking.

"Don't go wandering," they tell Zimara. She shrugs. "What we mean is," Henrik explains, "if you walk around, take a stick. All this meat and smoke— the dogs are a bit crazy, you know?"

Zimara walks over to the woman and picks out a picture, a mountain scene from a calendar, in a beat-up tin frame. "Very pretty," she says. "Someplace I'd like to visit." Zimara takes the photo from the frame and pays the seller enough to buy a loaf of bread. Zimara knows this woman, or anyway people like her. She will make the bread last for days.

Back at the van, Zimara shows the men this stupid photo. "Come on, come on, buy something." They just look away. Finally, one of them tosses the butt and walks over to the sitting woman. He picks through the pictures, examines them closely, and criticizes each in turn. The vendor replies with stories.

"These young people, aren't they handsome? You can tell, they've had a very happy day. And there, that's Smokvitsa Lake, you know, very famous, very beautiful. Do you have a home, sir? Wouldn't this look wonderful on the walls of your home? It's a lucky picture, you can see."

They haggle and bluff. He argues, she coaxes. He makes as if to stomp off, but turns back. Her hand sweeps grandly over these treasures, touching them each in turn. They settle on a price, and he pays it. Like Zimara, he leaves the picture frame. The woman claps her hands. She smiles and wipes her eyes.

"You have to know how to do it," he tells Zimara, and slips the picture into his boot. In such company, it's not polite to ask a lot of questions; otherwise, Zimara would ask his name. She wonders if he has killed women like the woman with the photographs.

A truck careens around the corner. Six Crusaders stand in the open bed, hanging on steel frames, swaying loose like bags of grain gutted by a hungry mob. Sweat streaks the dust caking faces frozen with fear. Glassy eyes see only flames and dying children. Men no longer but husks sucked dry, they sail ghost ships on an unseen sea. They have mounted a machinegun above the cab. They drive way too fast for these streets and are out of sight in a minute. Zimara hears the big gun rattle in the distance.

Back on the main road, Pavl's crew sees a man and two children walking jerkily toward them on the side of the road. They carry bags and backpacks. Cars and trucks rush by, inches away. What are they doing there? A little further on, the van passes the green and white Toyota parked just off the road, plastic sheets snapping in the wind. Pavl figures, "He's gone back for her."

● Maps

There's a fenced garden behind the women's barracks. Twice a week Goranka brings the girls back early to weed and water the vegetables. Otherwise they'd have nothing to eat but bread. A beggar woman appears at the iron fence one morning, asking for food. She wears heavy boots and a wool coat. Her skirt is torn almost to the knee, and half her face is bandaged. She stretches out one hand in supplication.

"Ignore her," the others counsel, but Yesenya digs up a potato and approaches the fence. She has to look carefully to be sure.

"Zimara, what have they done to you?"

Zimara reaches between the iron bars and takes the potato. "Stop crying, or I'll have to leave."

Yesenya wipes her face with the back of her hand.

"I want to get you out of here, but you have to help."

"I don't know how. Last week one of the girls got caught on the wire. They beat her and took her away."

Zimara looks at the wire above the iron bars. "We'll figure that out. First I want to know where you go, and when. How do they take you to the monastery? Do they let you go to the market?" Yesenya glances back at the other girls in the garden. "Can you comm me tonight?"

"I think so. When I go to the toilet. That's where I keep the comm."

"Good girl. Take these." Zimara draws paper and pencils from her sleeves and passes them to her cousin. "Now, listen carefully. You used to draw so beautifully. Next time you go there, I want you to draw a picture of everything you see inside the monastery. The stairs, the walks, the doors, everything. That will help us get you out."

"OK. How about maps of Hidris, and the pass?"

"What do you mean?"

"They have maps of the whole mountainside. I see them every day."

"Why would they show you their maps?"

"They put them on the refectory walls. That's where they meet at night."

Zimara is very surprised. "These maps, what do they show?"

Yesenya shrugs."You know, streets, roads, the paths down the mountain. Where the Crusaders are hiding. The lines of fences. The fields where they bury the bombs."

"The mines."

"I don't know what they call them."

"Incredible."

"Do you want me to make one for you?"

"I'm afraid they'd see you."

Vyolka is watching, and calls from a window. "Yesenya, send that woman away."

"I can do it here, tonight. Goranka won't know."

"Don't you have to see the maps?"

"I told you, I see them every day. I remember. I'll comm."

That night, Yesenya has a stipulation."We have to take the Skylanders."

"The what?"

"My friends. Nika and Taline and Vlasta."

"Yesenya, I can't take your friends."

"And we have a baby."

"You have a baby?"

"No! Emrush. Vlasta's brother. He's two." Yesenya has talked about the Skylanders before, but Zimara did not pay much attention.

"Yesenya, I know you love your friends, but five is too many. This is no journey for a baby. Let me bring you home."

"You don't know, but I do love them. They want to go home, too."

Zimara figures she'll be able to persuade her cousin, but she checks with Pavl anyway.

"Grandmother told us to take you back, and one more person, if it doesn't interfere with our business. She said nothing about four more. It just isn't safe. They'd ask for sure at the checkpoints."

"We could go around them." Zimara shows Pavl the maps Yesenya commed. Zimara has keyed in labels, based on what Yesenya told her.

"Where did you get these?" When Zimara doesn't answer, Pavl scrolls to a pathway etched into the escarpment below the monastery. "We used to take this one, before the war." Now, with the Crusaders holding the eastern half of Rudeny, guns and drugs flow freely across the border. Just pay the tariff, which the Crusaders split with Kulkhiz. These days the clandestine routes commence further west, at the shifting lines between Crusaders and government forces.

"You could do it again."

Pavl shakes his head and hands her back the comm. "Even if you could pay us, you know we have to leave tomorrow night."

"Call Bryony."

"I'm telling you, we have customers. We have deliveries to make."

"She's just a little girl."

"You better think this through. You'll get the both of you killed."

Yesenya doesn't show for two days, so Zimara spends her time walking the slopes around Hidris. For disguise, she has bribed a stray dog to keep her company. She is stopped only once, by a couple Kukhizan soldiers riding double on a tiny motorbike. "My goat," she mutters madly. "They took my goat." The soldiers let woman and mutt bob away across the field.

They are particularly careless this time of year, as Hidris gears up for the Sacrifice of Sankt Rudo, the festival for the monastery's founding martyr. It's a big moneymaker for the monastery, and now for the Crusade— the one season the devout are allowed into the sacred precincts. Already pilgrims have begun to gather. So the holy warriors pay little attention to the short woman with the torn face.

The maps Yesenya sends are suprisingly accurate. Zimara has no trouble locating the smuggling tracks, and is glad she did, because some of them are no good for wheels, so much have they grown over since the war started. Still, there are a couple that look like they'd take a van, certainly a motorbike, assuming they don't get much worse farther down the mountain. Zimara scrawls fingernail notes over Yesenya's drawings.

Now she just needs to get Yesenya over the wire, and steal a van, and learn to drive it.

When she sees her cousin again, the girl insists on staying with her friends.

"I'll come back later for them. Let me take you out now."

"You look at those maps and you come back and we'll all go together."

"I'm afraid you'll get hurt."

"I hardly see Konsta any more. If he comes back, I'll bite him."

Zimara considers this new Yesenya. "What shall I tell Filipa?"

"Tell her," Yesenya falters, "tell her I'll come back soon."

Before Zimara leaves, Yesenya gives her another potato from the garden. Zimara appreciates this, as she's almost out of money. She splits it with the dog, a kind of severance package. Ever see a dog bolt down a potato, and grin?

● Midnight Mercy

Zimara wakes when the driver yanks aside the canvass. All she can see in the floodlight are two figures in silhouette. The one on the left unslings a rifle and puts it to his shoulder, aiming at the stowaway. "Come out!" he squeaks. He clears his throat. "Come out," he growls.

"I don't know anything about this," the driver protests, and backs away.

Zimara sits wedged among a dozen propane tanks. She drapes one hand over the top of her boot, where she can reach Bryony's gun. Trouble is, she can barely move, she can't see who else is out there, and crouching among a few hundred liters of fuel is not the tactic recommended for a shootout. She raises her hands.

"Get out!" the Crusader commands, voice rising again.

"Of course, Captain. Give me a second, will you?" Zimara wriggles free and climbs out. "I've got a holo in my pocket," she says, and hands it over. Now she can see this isn't a captain at all but a kid in a corporal's tunic with too-big trousers, donated maybe by a dead man. The boy peels open the holo and holds it up to the light, peering at Bryony's scribble, turning the letters one way and then another. He holds the holo close to his face, brows furrowed, then hands it back. "What does it say?"

Zimara reads the words "Dvelko sent me," next to an image like a seagull or the crest of a wave, but more complicated. Dvelko is the name of a gangster family. Zimara can't tell if the Crusader boy has ever heard of them. By his reaction, the driver certainly has. He is a scrawny, dusty little man.

Zimara dances in the cold, hugging the jacket; they must be high above the plateau.

The corporal grunts. "Just a woman," he concludes. He lowers his weapon and turns off the floodlight.

"Just a freeloader," the driver says, and lights a cigarette.

"Sorry," she says. "Ran out of money, and sneaked under the canvass. I fell asleep," she explains sheepishly. She points to the driver. "This man doesn't know me."

"Where are you trying to go?"

"Obeyyed," she guesses.

"You're a bloody long way from Obeyyed," the driver tells her.

"Mother of God, how was I to know you were going to take the long way around?" She looks around. Steep slopes rise into the night. "Where the hell are we?"

The Crusader tells her. They are close to Rudeny border, but way off the main road.

"'Captain," the driver says, "can you let me go? I got a long way to go, and a lot of families shivering till I get there."

"Cut it out, Sava," the boy grumbles. The driver hands over a pass leaf and the boy runs it through a handheld. "And your pass is out of order."

The driver shakes the pack of cigarettes and extends it to the guard. "In what way?" He lights the other's cigarette, and both men take a satisfying drag.

The soldier taps the little screen. "See here? You should have checked this box for passengers."

"She's not a passenger, she's a damn stowaway. Secondly, there's no one on my truck now, is there? The pass is for you to let me pass, and there's no passenger, so you can let me pass with a pass that says no passenger, can't you?"

The Crusader shakes his head. "You need a new pass. You have to go back to Movement of Goods in Hidris." They dicker agreeably for a while, and settle on a price by the time they toss away the stubs. It's the same price the guard would have charged anyway without Zimara, and has charged this same trucker on this spot many times before: a tank of propane.

"Come with me," the boy tells Zimara. She hesitates. "I'm in charge here," he says. "You got to do what I tell you." They climb shaky steps and through a door held shut by a squeaky spring. Inside a single bulb lights a room cluttered with tables, chairs, and shelves packed with electronic files and devices. They have to step around boxes on the floor.

The boy pulls a pack of leafs from a drawer and runs one through a machine; now the driver has another thirty days to move around the border zone. The Crusader gives Zimara a ring of keys, holding one between thumb and forefinger. "There's a shed in back. You'll find a cart. Pull it round to the front, would you?"

By the time she does, the driver has the fuel tank dangling from a little crane. Once it's on the cart, the Crusader waves at the driver, who gets back in the cab and turns on the lights. The soldier walks to the barrier and raises it with the counterweight. The truck trundles down the road and around a bend.

The boy follows Zimara as she pushes the cart back to the shed. It's hard work, slightly uphill over stony ground. He locks the shed and points to the hut."Go on." There's no one else around. Zimara figures they'll go inside and she'll put her foot on a chair and bend over and the boy will be too busy watching her ass to notice her reach for the gun in her boot.

Instead, he props the rifle by the door and heads to a tiny stove in the corner. He lights it and puts on a pot. "I got some good tea. That spice the monks use."

She stares at him a moment, but he doesn't look up. "Sure." Zimara looks around. Posters of women naked except for the scarves hiding their faces adorn one wall. A big screen hangs from the other, with two tatty armchairs and a table drawn up below it. She sees bunkbeds through an open door. "Where are your buddies?"

"What?" He's licking canned milk off a spoon.

"Your mates." She gestures toward the back. "You're not the only one stationed here."

He shrugs. "The festival in Hidris. They wanted to go. We drew straws." He sets two cups on the table by the wall screen. He clears away some clothes and a pair of boots from a chair so she can sit.

"Must be lonely," she says as he pours the hot water over tea leaves in a strainer.

"It's quiet," he says. "It's nice." He sits next to her and slurps from the cup. "Do you like Dodger?"

"I don't know Dodger." The tea tastes dusty, but she's glad for the heat.

"It's a finger play game. Here, I'll show you." He slips on a transmit glove and lights up the screen from a box under the table. All Zimara can make out is a whirling array of shadows and buzzing lights. "It's easy," he says, and Zimara thinks maybe the whirl is going faster, and tilting. "I'm at Ultimate Pandemonium. That's like, next to the highest level. Do you want to try?"

"Let me watch you for a while." After a minute she asks, "What do you call the highest level? Hyper Ultra Ultimate?"

"Meta," he says, but now he's focussed in, and doesn't want to talk.

He's got a little tin can under the table and after the first couple games, pulls out a bag of weed and a pipe. Eventually he offers it to Zimara, who puffs noisily but not deeply. An hour passes almost wordlessly, the boy groggier with each hit, slower with the glove, sinking into the armchair, until finally he falls asleep. His mouth hangs open. Zimara waits, watching, then reaches over and turns off the game. Yup, deep asleep.

She goes to the drawer with the pass leafs, and pulls out a handful, and stuffs her pockets. She looks at the activating device. It takes her a while to figure out —she's a little stoned— and she wastes a couple of the passes. Then she gets the hang of it and activates several of the passes for different time periods for the next year. She keeps a couple unmarked, wondering if they can be copied. She looks up to notice the boy staring at her with bloodshot eyes.

"Who are you?" he demands.

"I'm Zimara. We were playing Dodger."

"O." His brows furrow. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for some music. Do you have music?" He gestures to a shelf strewn with cables and boxes and audio leafs. Zimara picks among the mess, finds ear buds. She scrounges for food, too. All he's got is bags of chips and candy. She chomps through a chocolate bar while she shoves the rest into a backpack. The boy is already asleep.

A massive dagger gleams from a belt slung over the back of his chair. Zimara thinks it would be easy to kill him, and slip out into the night. He is bound to have a bike or car or truck out back. She could be in Saray by tomorrow night— if she knew how to drive, or even how to start a car without the code.

Zimara has killed pigs but not people. She thinks she ought to learn how. "You are a monster," she tells the sleeper. She takes the knife, leans over, whispers in his ear. "I can cut your throat." He shifts uneasily. "I can do it," she tells him. "From here to here," and she draws the blade across the pearly skin, barely touching. He snorts, and she draws back, startled. Zimara stares at him a moment, blade held tight in her fist, then slides it back into the sheath. Nodding to herself, she tells him, "It will be easy." She picks up her pack and heads out the door.

It's so dark. She stumbles now and again on unseen stones. There's hardly any traffic, and Zimara has to walk many kilometers. She steps off the road when a car or truck goes by. More than once she is startled by a sudden shaking of the bushes, where she has aroused an animal. Once she walks past a goat, a splotch of white in the distance. He glares at her suspiciously. The galaxy kites across the sky.

Zimara inserts the stolen audio. It plays the lively love songs of Haleesa Sladek Seerchay. She has been listening to these tunes since she was a kid. When the sun comes up Zimara starts to hitchhike.

• Interrogate

Hungry and footsore, Zimara makes it to the checkpoint near Saray late in the day. To avoid a search, she attaches herself to a group of refugees heading to New Start camp. Certainly she looks the part, dirty and bandaged, but one of the men, terrified of getting crosswise with the cops, denounces her. When they find Bryony's gun they zip-tie her and toss her into a van with a half-dozen smugglers and rapists.

An hour later, the watch commander is thumbing through Zimara's comm and comes across Yesenya's maps. Very agitated, he calls the Political Police. At first the call annoys Captain Kut, interrupting his very important work. Then he sees the maps.

"What do we have on Rudomil?" he asks Lieutenant Djordjevich. When they compare Yesenya's drawings to maps from before the war, they are clearly the same place, with some intriguing additions. Zimara's labels describe the buildings' functions for the Crusaders, not how the monks used them. Kut has the sergeant at the checkpoint send Zimara to the PoPo office in Saray.

"I know you. You work with the translator at New Start."

"As I told your Sergeant. Name's Miryam. Call her."

Kut nods to his number two, who makes the call. "Meanwhile," the Captain says, "maybe you can explain how you got these maps." He's put her comm files up on a wall screen over his desk.

"Online. You should try it. Changed my life." She watches him without expression. Most detainees, the Captain would respond with a sharp smack to the head. He contemplates the filthy pink-fringed bandage packing the left side of her face; he reckons he could generate some splatter from that.

"Eaten yet?" he asks.

"Last night." So Kut sends Djordjevich down the street to fetch some supper. "Reason I ask," he tells Zimara, "is that we'd like to bust up the Crusade and put these killers against a wall. Information like this can help. If we knew someone inside Rudomil, that could help a lot." He remembers now what they said about her at the camp; figures she can't be a big fan of holy war.

"And the PoPo— how can you help me?"

The cop forces a smile. A lot of these peasants, a beating just makes it simpler for them. They'll do what they can to dodge another punch, but they are used to getting hit. They'll never give you what you

want most, because it's their last best bargaining chip. A cop can spend hours extracting nanobytes. It's boring and inefficient. "Depends on what you are trying to do," the Captain replies.

By the time the Lieutenant comes back with supper, Zimara has told the Captain about Yesenya and the trip to Hidris, leaving out Bryony's gang— an omission the Captain has no trouble spotting. "I'm going to get her out. I'm trying to figure out how."

Kut unrolls the greasy newspaper over the top of his desk, wrapping a huge paw around a lamb and eggplant pie and sliding another to Zimara's side. Djordjevich comes back with cups and a steaming teapot.

Around a spicy mouthful, tongue seeking a dab of sauce on his lip, the Captain asks, "How did this girl see these maps?"

"I told you. They're posted where the women eat. She says the officers meet there at night." Zimara eats more daintily, not letting slip a single morsel, and chews slowly, so as not to betray her hunger.

"And this girl, where else does she go at Rudomil?"

"She cleans toilets. She goes everywhere."

Kut makes Zimara go over her story again and again. What routes did she take? How did she get through the checkpoints? How are Crusader forces arrayed in Hidris town, and inside the monastery? Can she identify the units? How many trucks, tanks, APCs did she see? Most of all, he makes her explain Yesenya's maps. Where did the information come from?

"You're asking me questions I can't answer. My cousin might know."

"Let's call her."

"I'm not going to call her. It's very dangerous. She calls me when she can do so unheard."

"Give me her number. I'll be very careful."

"No." Zimara keeps that number in her head, not on comm. And as with most crime comms these days, the true call record is hidden among ten to the sixth fake numbers. Kut has the lieutenant clone it anyway, then passes it back to Zimara.

"When will you see her again?"

"I don't know. I need money and a way to get her out of there."

"We can help you with that. Let me give you some transmitters, very small. We can tell your cousin where to put them."

"No. She's a little kid."

"What do you want? You want us to kill this Konsta guy?"

"No. Maybe."

"We can put him on a list."

"You do what you want. I'm not going to put my cousin in danger."

But Kut won't drop it. The timid generals in the capital, and their NATO overseers, have been looking for a way into Rudomil for months. It's on the Kulkhiz side of the border, where they have few assets. They've got satellite images, of course, but the monastery's walls and towers effectively conceal most of the new installations. NATO can intercept transmissions, but they can't eavesdrop on the Crusader commanders as they meet.

If Zimara's story can be verified, this little girl is well placed to do that. The Captain feels the satisfying weight of impending promotion. By the time Miryam shows up, he is badgering Zimara to cooperate.

"OK, let's try this. Ever see one of these?" He holds up what looks like an ordinary comm, but with two keys along the narrow edge.

"My cousin has a comm."

"This is better. Safer. We call it a mimic." Miryam is very curious and gestures to have a look.

The Captain continues, "To any eavesdropping software, this will look like all the traffic around it. No one will pick it out of the stream unless they know exactly what to look for." Also, it's very thin and light, more like a leaf; easy to conceal.

"She won't need it. I'm going to get her out of there."

"Just give it to her."

Miryam passes the fancy comm to Zimara. "Captain." Miryam is patient, from long practice with these types. "It's very late. You've heard what this woman has been through. Let her go."

"But we've barely begun." He shows her the gun the sergeant took off Zimara— Bryony's pistol. "Did you know your friend had this in her boot? It's a very serious offense."

Miryam snaps her head back as if avoiding some projectile. "Damn! Where did you get that?"

The Captain nods. "Exactly. Your girl has been naughty."

"You said you could help," Zimara points out. "How?" She hasn't told him that really, she's got to bring four girls out. She'll need Bryony's help, or this cop's, or both.

"Well. That will take some planning. Strategy, you know."

"Fine. Call me when you know how to do it."

"I'll need more information. And so will you."

"I'll think about it."

"Doctor Avbury expects us momentarily," Miryam insists. "I see no reason for her to call the Minister, do you?"

Kut fears no mere Minister, but doesn't want the higher-ups to hear about this opportunity until he has sewn it up himself. They would only screw it up. The Captain stands. "Thanks for your help. We'll talk again."

Zimara holds out her hand. "I'll need the gun."

The Captain raises his eyebrows. "I bet you will." He holds out Bryony's loaner. "Zimara Nareet. I'll remember you."

She looks him up and down. "And I you." She peels the bandage from her face, holds it out with two fingers, and drops it to Kut's office floor. The zeta stands out nicely. She takes the gun and tucks it in her boot.

Zimara dreams deep that night. She walks atop a narrow stone path high above a shadowed landscape. It's a road or the wall of a country too big to fathom. The sky is so blue it's nearly black. The wall stretches far out to the lightening horizon. It's windy, but as long as Zimara concentrates on her footing, she can move fast and safe. She walks for hours. Her feet hurt a little but they'll take her as far as she needs to go. She feels eager, happy. She is going someplace very interesting.

• Driving Lesson

Zimara has another project. To start, she needs driving lessons.

"You've got to dress the part, you know. A man's hat and jacket. How do you feel about mustaches?" Rekady jokes.

"Also, I'll need one of those little boxes," she tells him.

"A coder?"

"Right. That turns cars on."

"You planning to buy a car?"

"Get me a box, I won't need to buy a car. Can you get one for me?"

"Expensive. Because we'd need someone to turn off the tracker, and I don't know how to do that."

"I asked the women for a lot of money to go to Hidris. I don't want to have to ask them again."

"Also, you don't want to explain what for," says Rekady. "I got a better idea. Why don't you just disable the codes. Then you don't need a box."

"Really? And then I can drive a car?"

"Any car."

"You can show me how?"

"It's a bit tricky. You need the right gear. And, of course, if anyone sees you . . . ."

"OK. You show me how."

Mandalika teases Zimara about Rekady. “Such long lashes. Such long fingers . . . .”

Zimara puts her nose in the air. “He’s teaching me to drive.”

“Maybe he’d like another student,” Arasely teases. “One less stubborn.”

“Please yourself.”

Mandalika and Arasely look at each other. Next day, they join Rekady for driving lessons, too.

● Debt Paid

Rekady takes the women to Saray for a lesson in city driving. They stop by Bryony’s riverside headquarters. Zimara returns Bryony's gun to the gangster.

Bryony checks the clip. “You’ve been frugal— good. I waive the rental fee.” She slides the gun into her sash. “Get the kid?”

“I have to go back. I may need your help again.”

“Next time, bring more money.”

Zimara takes out one of the unmarked passes she stole and puts it on Bryony’s desk. “A token of my appreciation.”

The gangster picks it up, eyebrows raised. She runs it through a slot device on her desk, reads it, nods, and slides it into her sash.

Zimara asks, “Can you make copies?”

“Perhaps. It will take a special machine. Hard to come by.”

“I hope you succeed. Perhaps you could let me know.”

Mandalika is a joyful competitor, and soon gets into the spirit of Rudeny traffic mayhem. Men gape at her as she peels past, centimeters away. Arasely is more methodical, a craftswoman, weaving through traffic like the shuttle in a loom. Zimara aims the car like a bullet, but grinds the gears something terrible.

“Jesus, Zee, you’re going to break my car,” Rekady complains.

“I know a mechanic,” she boasts, and squeals tight around a corner.

● Admirer

Doctor Sevik notices the Skylanders as they go by the Tower of Penance. The third time, he goes out and gets in their way.

“You look like you’re on your way to someplace important.”

The girls have seen this guy around, usually with an entourage.

“Very important,” Taline says.

“My, you’re a pretty one. What’s your name?”

“Toilets.” She shakes a stinky mop in his face. “We’ve got like a hundred more toilets to clean.” Sevik makes a face and steps aside.

When they get around the corner, Nika wonders, “Who is that guy?” They roll their eyes and giggle.

● Family Values

Time to go to back to Echmash. There's a bus from Saray to Obeyyed, the provincial capital, twenty keys from the village. It's Crusader territory, so first they have to buy a pass in the Saray market— totally illegal, but easy to do, because so many people in the capital have family on the plateau. The women also buy a bagful of video games and saints' statues —common gifts— and say they're domestics returning to their husbands. At the third checkpoint the Crusaders, bored teens in oversize uniforms, relieve the passengers of all their cash, which pisses off the Crusaders at the fourth checkpoint, who immediately dispatch an officer to demand a share from the third, and meanwhile make do by relieving the passengers of their remaining goods— rings, anklets, a man's spectacles, and of course the palm games. Zimara and Arasely get off the bus just short of town, and walk all night to Echmash.

The women spend the night in an abandoned goat shed overlooking Filipa's farm. In the morning they wait till they see Todor's GoGet trundling down the road. Filipa comes out when she hears the dogs. She and Zimara embrace.

“You remember Arasely?”

“I do.” She takes Arasely's hand. Her glance goes back and forth over the visitors. "How can I help?"

"First, information."

"First, breakfast," Arasely amends.

They rustle up some bread and eggs and fyley-root tea. Filipa tells her cousin, “Your kids are not here.”

“Arasely told me. I still don’t understand.”

Filipa pushes the plate of bread at her. “Eat. They’re OK. Some shitty factory outside Djemdjad. They’re safe. They’re out of the war, Zimara.”

“Tell me.”

Filipa sets down her cup. “You heard Yorg remarried.”

“Yes.”

“Here’s what they say: when they thought you were dead, Blago had to pay Yorg so he could get another wife. Then Blago hears you’re alive and decides he wants his money back. He’s got an auntie his father has been trying to get rid of for months— an old widow, evidently the husband ate his own grenade last year. So Blago makes Yorg take the aunt. She sent your kids away.”

“I have family in Ogonyok. She could have sent them there.”

“Don’t you see? This is how Yorg gets the money to pay Blago back. They leased Gret and Aloyzi to a carpet factory.”

Zimara has both fists on the table. Forks rattle in the plates.

Arasely says, “Zimara, you can’t kill him now. Because then I can’t get my kids and you’ll never get yours.”

Filipa stands up to get the teapot, comes back and pours, sits. Softly: “Yesenya said you’d seen her.”

Zimara starts to come back into focus. With shaking hand, she puts cup to lips.

“She’s OK. When I saw her, Konsta hadn’t come back. I couldn’t get her out.”

“She said she wouldn’t go with you.”

“That’s right. She wants us to get the other girls out, too.”

Filipa puts the tips of her fingers against her lips. “Is that even possible?”

“Maybe, with planning and money. Let me show you what Yesenya found.” Zimara takes out her comm, and pages through the maps. They talk about Yesenya’s routes and schedules, and how to intercept her, and how to get out of town fast. There are no obvious ways, but a couple possibilities. It helps to know the routine at the checkpoints. They decide what Filipa will look for next time she visits.

“I know where Todor keeps his money,” she says.

"He'll know you took it."

"Fuck him."

"You should come with us, then."

"OK."

"What about the pickup in the back?" Arasely asks. "Does it work?"

"Yes. Why?"

Arasely smiles. "Zimara and me, we know how to drive."

Filipa raises her eyebrows. "Good. Let me get my things." She grabs food, clothes, pots and pans, a photo of Yesenya.

"Guns?"

Filipa nods, comes back with a shotgun and a couple pistols. "I don't know if this one works," she warns.

"Take them all. Let's go." Filipa snorts with glee. Todor is going to be so angry.

From Filipa's they have to cross a ridge to get to Arasely's father's house. When Arasely's husband went on Crusade, he left the children at their grandfather's house, in the care of Arasely's aunt. The three women linger in the brush, trying to spot the old man. They hear a chainsaw in the woods on the slope opposite, and soon they see him moving along the edge of the pasture. They stand and head to the farmhouse.

Hrko barks loudly but not long; he knows Arasely; he's glad to see her.

The aunt has been expecting them. She comes out with the children as soon as she hears the dog. The kids can't believe it. They run to Arasely and throw their arms around her. The twins are crying. The ten year old tries to maintain some dignity.

"Hurry, hurry,"Arasely tells them, and boosts them into the bed of the pickup and gets in with them.

"Can we help you?" Filipa asks.

The aunt nods. Zimara and Filipa follow her inside, come out with bags stuffed with food and clothes. As they shove these in with the children, they hear a shout from the hillside. Grandpa is tearing down the path, cursing and waving a stick. "Get in the back," Zimara waves at Filipa. Zimara gets behind the wheel, while Arasely's aunt piles in beside her. Zimara can't start the engine.

Arasely pounds on the cab's window. "Clutch in!"

Zimara gets it started and turned around. They trundle down the rutted track. She can't get it into second.

"Foot on the clutch!" Arasely yells.

A rock bounces off the roof of the cab, barely missing the kids in the back. They peel off down the drive, spitting gravel. To their left, grandpa races along the bank above the road, quite spry for an old guy, and very red in the face. Arasely's aunt cocks an arm out the window and pumps her fist. Her father is so astonished, he forgets to watch where he's going and tumbles head over heels.

The women hoot and yell and pound on the doors.

"Did you get his comm?"

The aunt holds it up.

Last stop, Zimara's house. The dogs raise a hell of a row and race to Zimara, who kneels to hug them, and to pick up a nice, fist-sized rock.

Yorg comes out on the porch. He is barefoot and shirtless. Getting bald, Zimara notes with surprise. A tall bony woman waits behind him, hand on the edge of the door— must be Blago's auntie. Zimara stands, letting her sleeve fall over the rock in her left hand.

"What are you doing here?" Yorg demands. "Get the hell out."

Zimara takes out Bryony's pistol, holds it by her side. This has the desired effect. Yorg has never seen a woman raise her hand to a man, never mind a weapon. With a strangled howl, her faithless

husband comes charging off the porch. Zimara waits for him to get close, then raises the gun to the right. Yorg lurches for it. Zimara clocks him with the rock in her left hand. He drops at her feet, cheek split open. Zimara kneels beside him.

"You sold my kids to Blago. I don't shoot you because you warned me once, but do not try my patience." Yorg gurgles and spits molars. His first wife pokes through his pockets, for his comm, keys to car and motor bike, and his Kingdom Card. It's a kind of ID leaf that lets the local priest and the Crusader commanders record a person's contributions to church and crusade— mostly financial, but which could include a host of other meritorious not to say murderous deeds. They are also a way to track disobedience, tax delinquencies, and a general lack of enthusiasm. After the Crusaders take a village, each survivor gets a Kingdom card. The smart move is to get one before any attack, just in case, by bribing the priest. Yorg did that, along with a host of his neighbors. Hedging their bets is the peasants' way of life. It's not good to lose your Kingdom card.

Zimara sits back on her heels, and holds the card where Yorg can see it. His right eye rolls wildly, blinking out the blood. "Think I'll hold on to this for awhile. You want it back, you know what I want." Zimara considers what else to say. All the words she had once. Now she can't think of a thing. She stands and walks to the porch, gun loose in her hand.

Yorg struggles to push off the ground, but Arasely's firm boot on his shoulder and the shotgun barrel at the base of his ear calm him down considerable.

The new wife doesn't back down. She's not so old, forty maybe. Well, old, given the average lifespan in Rudeny. Pinch-faced. No stranger to violence.

"What's your name?" Zimara asks.

"Dubravka."

"Got kids?"

Dubravka hesitates.

"Here's the thing, Dubravka. Yorg is not safe, and you are not safe, until I get my children back."

The taller woman stares, says nothing.

"So my children need to be here when I come back to Echmash. For your sake. Do you understand?"

She nods once. She would spit if she dared.

"Now, I'm going to look for my things. I think you know Arasely and her aunt. You stay here. Filipa, there should be some tins of petrol in the shed. Would you mind?"

It's all gone. Her boots, the bracelets, her mother's wrist clasp, the straw doll she made for Gret years ago. There's a two-handed ax in the corner of the kitchen, looks vaguely familiar, but Yorg never had an ax like that. Zimara rolls Yorg's guns into his jacket and brings them out to Filipa. Yorg sits in the mud under Arasely's pitiless gaze, moaning and cradling his head. Dubravka stands motionless at the edge of the porch, looking off to the woods; she has turned her back on this domestic idyll.

Zimara says, "I'm going to walk around. Back in a minute."

Behind the house there's a rusty roll of fencing. Zimara tips it over, sits, looks, breathes. The barn, the toolshed, the pigs and chickens. Once she loved this place. When she stands again, she is ready to go.

The women and kids huddle in the bed of the pickup, as Crusader custom requires. Zimara sits up front by herself, wearing a ball cap and Yorg's jacket. Her raspy voice and a stolen pass leaf gets them get through the checkpoint at Echmash before there's any alarm. Zimara turns south from there. She wants to be far from Echmash when they reach the Crusader front line. They drive all night, very slowly in the dark. Even so, Zimara almost drops them in a ditch.

"Let me," Arasely commands, and takes the wheel and ball cap. They switch again at dawn. At mid-day they drop off Arasely with the guns in a backpack. She's got the most dangerous job. A couple miles further they stop again at the last Crusader checkpoint, the one Bryony recommended. There has

been no fighting here for months. Another pass and a gift to the sergeant get them through. They drive out of sight of the checkpoint and stop and wait. It takes two hours for Arasely to emerge from the woods. Her kids know enough not to yell, but they cry when they see her.

● Reunions

So they've got themselves a little undergound railroad. Many of the women at camp have sisters, or cousins, or children held against their will in villages across the plateau.

To begin with, the villages are relatively easy to exfiltrate. Behind the front lines, the Crusader checkpoints are scattered and sleepy, and the families at New Start have secret allies in almost every hamlet. The rescuers' biggest advantage is that the holy warriors cannot imagine such an enterprise. Many men who lose their women are none too eager to report it. Anyhow, it's wartime. People are always disappearing, especially women. For a long time, Crusader officers simply don't pay attention.

At first it's just Zimara, Arasely and Filipa, then Damyana and Mandalika want to help. As they switch attention from one village to another, they need more women at camp to give information, and to make contact.

Rekady has organized a pool of drivers making midnight runs almost weekly. A few of the regular camp drivers, and a couple of the women. Zimara of course; the translator Miryam once, when Mandalika was sick. The refugee women haven't had much practice driving, so they learn on the easy roads, and ride shotgun when they get close to the targets. When she's behind the wheel, Mandalika wears a cowboy hat from one of the charity shipments. The men laugh softly when they see her, and she smiles in the darkness. Many nights the drivers wait hours in the trees off the road as one or two women slip into the darkness, to negotiate or bribe, finally to bring out the children.

Hidris is harder. Lots of refugees have kin there, abducted and abused. The reunion team, as they come to think of themselves, know how to get into the town, but not how to get out. It's over the border and crawling with soldiers. As Zimara meets more and more people desperate to bring family out of Hidris, the logistical problems come to seem insurmountable. They can't just make a series of raids to bring women out over time. The town would snap shut like a trap after the first rescue.

"We'll have to bring them all out at once," Zimara concludes.

"Do you realize what that would take?" Arasely points out. "Trucks, money . . . ."

"Guns."

"Information," Filipa adds.

"We can get those," Miryam figures. "But it takes time. We have to wait."

"I hate it," says Zimara, thinking of her cousin. But she knows Miryam is right. So almost from the start the women understand that the recovery effort must get bigger and stronger.

In the meantime, they estabish a regular courier service to Hidris, to keep contact with Yesenya and others there, and to learn everything about the place. Yesenya's sister Filipa agrees to carry news back and forth, and finds others to help.

● Tidy Up

Blago is the first to notice these subterranean rustlings, because Yorg's new wife is his aunt. She can't call Blago directly, of course, he is far too important, but gets the word to him through his father. It reminds him of unfinished business. Still he has no idea that Zimara's interference extends beyond her family.

"I want you to meet me Friday in Obeyyed," Blago tells Konsta. "Time to take out that bitch Zimara once and for all. Call Sejad and Ratko. I'll let you fuck her first."

Konsta calls Friday morning.

“Where the hell are you?” Blago demands.

“Sorry, boss. I got the runs, really bad. Doctor says I need to stay here. I got to take these meds.” Konsta coughs into the comm, to show he’s really sick.

“When I get back, I’ll gut you like a fish,” Blago promises. He waves to Sejad and Ratko. “Get in the van.”

● Three Bullets

"You've got to leave the camp," Avbury tells her. "I love your work, but it's too dangerous for us."

"OK," Zimara agrees.

"We can find you a place in Saray. We could ask Kut to help."

"I don't need his help."

"Someday you might."

Zimara thinks a minute. "Possibly. I'll ask for it then."

But the Crusaders come first, Blago and his boys in a taxi minivan: a good choice for Crusaders so close to Saray. There are hundreds of these taxis around, and they go everywhere. For disguise the Crusaders take on real passengers before they cross over into government territory, and ditch them on the other side.

They pull up by the New Start gate at dusk. Blago wears his newest leather jacket, silver skulls at either shoulder, and a nice silver crucifix hangs from his neck. He has brought a new ax, even sharper and shinier than the one he gave up to Yorg, and slid it under the seat.

"Be cool," Blago tells the guards at the gate. "We just want to talk to one of the women. Yorg's wife. Is it true you take orders from a woman? Tell her. We'll wait." He steps down and lounges against the vehicle, swinging his prayer beads. Clack, clack they go against the door.

When Avbury gets to the gate, she tells Blago she'll call the cops. He pushes off the van and saunters towards her. The security guys raise their weapons and move in front of Avbury.

"The cops are in Saray, forty minutes away,” he taunts. “You really want to call them? You know how much they like going out at night." Blago walks between the guards and brushes their weapons to the side, clicking his tongue. He faces Avbury at arm's length— close enough to show what a gentleman he is for not grabbing her by the throat. She sees he's a handsome fellow, easy smile, thick curly hair; she wishes she'd brought her gun. "You have important work here, Doctor. I don't want to interrupt. Really, I just need to talk to this woman Zimara. I'm sure you know her— she has an unfortunate face. Fifteen minutes."

By now Khamzat is striding toward them, half a dozen security guys in tow. The two at the gate stand straighter when they see backup. A hundred women cluster at the fence.

"They don't come in," Avbury tells the guards, and walks back into the camp.

"Is this what you want?" Blago calls. "We’ll just come back, you know."

Zimara shouts, "Wait!" She pushes her way through the crowd. Avbury sees her and grabs her arm, furious. "What are you doing?"

"You don't want them to come back."

"They'll kill you."

"So, help me." Avbury stares at her.

"You know how," Zimara urges. Avbury turns toward the gate. "She'll come," she yells. "I'm getting her a comm. Come," she orders Zimara.

"Sure," Blago says, "get her a comm." He strolls the few meters back to the minivan. "By all means." He tells Sejad, "This time use the damn ax."

Ratko says, “Captain, it’s my turn. You promised.”

"Yeah, yeah." Blago waves a hand and turns to Sejad. "Mind if he does her first? Me, I think they’re better after. No mouth to talk back." They all chuckle. A great wit, their Captain. He puts his back against the van, swings the prayer beads. Clack, clack.

Avbury opens the safe in her office. She gives the revolver to Zimara, and bullets. "Do you know how to use this?"

Zimara pops it open, tries the hammer, loads it, drops it in the pocket of her skirt.

"Are you sure?" Zimara looks impatient. "Don't bring it back," Avbury says.

Zimara makes her way through the crowd and out the gate. Ratko and Sejad shift to give her space on the seat between them. Ratko drapes an arm over her shoulder, friendly-like. Zimara doesn't bother to look at him. From the gate Zimara looks tiny. Blago climbs in behind the wheel. "Fifteen minutes," he calls to Avbury. "We'll be back."

"Use the comm," Avbury calls out. Blago smirks and waves as he drives away.

The women at the fence start a low keening. When Miryam catches up to Avbury, she demands, "How could you let this happen?"

"Call the cops," Avbury tells her. But Blago's right, they take an hour to get to the camp, and then they refuse to chase the Crusaders. They have no interest in gunfights in the dark. "You told me yourself, she insisted on going," the sergeant tells the doctor.

Avbury calls Captain Kut. To her surprise, he promises to start a search right away. He's got his own unit. But he wants to know why Zimara agreed to go.

"Maybe, you know, maybe those assholes will slip up and she'll grab a gun and shoot them."

Kut is not deceived. "I don’t believe it. What was she thinking?" The Captain thinks Zimara's a fool, and the doctor, too, for letting Zimara do this. But he has good advice. "In that case, no searches. I'm not going to put good men at risk for this stupidity. And you don't want it either. It ends one way, and no one sees her again, or it ends the other way, and you don't want questions." Hearing it put that way, Avbury can only agree.

"Sorry to bother you so late."

"Let me know," he says, and hangs up.

Zimara comes back past midnight. She is still a terrible driver, and lurches to a halt at the gate. The women are astonished. "I need my stuff," Zimara tells them. She wears a shiny leather jacket against the cold. It’s torn at the shoulders, and the collar seems a bit streaky— hard to tell in the dark.

The other residents fetch her clothes and meds. Rekady runs up with a hatful of riyals. "You'll need this."

"You've done enough." Zimara sits patiently, but Rekady can see her hands shaking on the wheel.

Eyeing her new jacket, he suggests, "Maybe you have some silver you could sell me."

Zimara laughs, reaches into a pocket, drops something in the dirt. Rekady gives her all the money he has.

When she sees Avbury and Miryam approach, Zimara holds up her hand to keep them back, as if she's contaminated. "I'll call."

Just then Arasely hurries up with two cloth bags, one of them her own. Zimara smiles a crooked smile, and Arasely climbs in. Zimara leaves a second time. Rekady stoops to pick up two pebble-size silver skulls. "Zimara," the women call. "Zimara!"

● Choose

"What about you?" Avbury asks. "I can't have you here if you're working with Zimara."

Miryam says, "Zimara doesn't need a translator. You do. I stay. Besides: sooner or later Zimara is going to ask for your help, and then you'll ask for mine."

Rekady shrugs. He likes the job, but he can find another. "I'll see what she wants," he tells Avbury.

"Do what you have to," Avbury says. "But make up your mind."

Avbury also calls Captain Kut. "About that matter last night. There was a good resolution. It's over now. Thanks for your concern."

"Not quite over. There's a bit of clean-up to do. But I'll see to it. You tell her that if she calls."

Zimara calls Yorg from the minivan. “I’ll be coming to Echmash soon. Make sure my children are there. And tell your other wife not to bother calling her nephew. Blago is no longer available.”

In a house in Saray, Arasely hands Zimara a pair of scissors. Zimara cuts off the lobe of Arasely’s right ear, and cleans the wound with alcohol. She drops the tracker on the floor for Arasely to stomp on.

"Hurts!" Arasely confirms.

"You're free," Zimara says.

§ BANDITS

● Fundraiser

In building the escape routes, Zimara has in effect started a clandestine network that spans provinces. Over the coming months she adds people and places, and puts them to good use. And soon women from the reading class are packing up, one by one.

"Going home?" Miryam inquires.

"Yes," they lie.

Money is the most pressing problem. Filipa's husband Todor was the first contributor. Soon there are more. Tamar takes Arasely and Mandalika with her to her sister's house.

"Pack up," she tells the sister.

Tamar's brother-in-law stands stock-still. He has never before seen one woman with a gun, let alone three. His face turns redder and redder.

"There's a loose stone to the left of the fireplace," the sister says, as she gathers up the children. Tamar kneels and pries it away, pocketing a wad of cash and jewelry. Her sister's husband gives a strangled cry. Mandalika raises her hand and shakes her head. She doesn't even have to unsling the submachinegun on her shoulder. The sister comes back with a bag of food and clothes. Women and children head out into the dark.

Soon there's a kind of alimony system, with lots of generous donors. The men dare not complain, for fear of ridicule, and for fear the Crusaders will shoot them.

Sometimes the gang doesn't have to lift a finger. Every rural family above starvation level has a cache of silver or riyals or electronics sealed in Watertite, hidden somewhere on their property. These secret hoards are often the only insurance against the misfortunes of war. Lately they've come to serve as a new kind of dowry. Fugitive women steal them on their way out the door. They are like a ticket to join the reunion teams.

Guns are the next thing. The husbands contribute here, too. Banditry is an old tradition in these parts. New outlaws and new victims soon get the hang of it, learn to follow their scripts.

Getting around is hardest near the front lines, but in large parts of the country neither the government nor the Crusade has much presence. There's a big part of the coastal plain still nominally under government control, but subject to frequent raids. And then there are the established smuggling routes, where the Crusaders tolerate and tax a substantial clandestine trade. As they become more experienced, as they steal more money and find out who to bribe, the reunion teams learn to slip in and out of the countryside with relative ease. Then, too, they have the passes Zimara stole near Hidris, and the copies Bryony's gang has made since.

A fourth issue is how to prepare for Crusader retaliation.

"We have a little bit of time," Zimara tells the others. "These men don't even see us. That won't last forever. We have to be ready."

● So Embarrassing

The Crusader captains can't figure out why the rank and file have been acting so hang-dog of late. A well-digger complains to Hayk that his wife ran off with the children.

"They jumped into a car with two women I've never seen. And when I chased them, the one in back pointed a rifle at me!"

"Preposterous!" the captain tells him.

"It's true!"

“Why didn’t you kill them?”

“They had a gun!”

Too angry to speak, Hayk pulls his own gun and shoots the luckless husband in the teeth. When he calms down, Hayk turns to his men. “You see another man afraid of a woman, you kill him dead! Do you understand?”

“Willa God!” they shout, and shake their weapons fiercely.

What Hayk does not realize is that already half a dozen of his brave conquerors have lost money and children to Zimara’s gang. No one is in a hurry to enlighten him. Matter of fact, some start to feel a bit queasy, one of those virus things; might be best to stay home tomorrow.

● On the Job Training

At first, Zimara leads every foray into the villages. She insists there be at least one woman from the village with them, for intell, but also as a recruitment tool— You want to get your kids? Join the gang. Also she wants as many women as possible to get this experience, because it bonds them together, and makes them stronger tactically. As some of the women get experience with several rescues, Zimara assigns them to lead others. She begins to call them *prihvadji*— those who accept responsibility.

One of their most important duties is to assess new recruits. This is dangerous work. Will the new enlistee be brave enough; smart enough? Not something you can always tell right off, because it takes a while to develop the right mix of skill, caution and confidence. In the meantime, they worry.

As the gang expands, the women will establish a second tier of small groups within the larger units, each with its own prihvadj.

Miryam has an idea, which she calls in to Arasely, and arranges to make happen. Within a week new posters adorn bus stops in towns and villages. "Where's Blago?" they ask, and feature a picture of the handsome Captain smiling behind a machine gun. "Help us find Blago!" At the bottom, "The Women's Collective." Zimara’s team gets a flood of calls from friends and relatives behind Crusader lines, asking for help and offering it.

● Where’s Blago?

Blago’s man Bogorol is starting to wonder. He is supposed to be in charge when Blago’s gone, but the other men ignore his orders. Worse, Hayk and Rahday are cutting in on the unit’s business. The handsome ax-man is nowhere to be found. Bogorol leaves a message with Brother Michael.

Next day Brother Michael drops in on Sevik, his spy chief. "I need your help. Track down Blago. No one has seen him for weeks."

"Are you concerned? He’s always chasing some hare. Usually comes back with the hide." The Crusade is more like a franchise than an army. Each commander runs his own enterprise pretty much as he sees fit. They coagulate when new opportunities for looting arise. In the meantime, they steal from each other.

"Blago has become a rich man. Could he have quit our movement?"

Sevik snorts in disbelief. "Guy like that, he’ll never stop wanting more. Anyway, it's land he has, not cash. That I know of.”

"Could he be sitting in Kut's office, spilling his guts about us?"

The Doctor strokes his jaw. "Hard for me to believe.”

“I don’t think so either. But check it out, will you?"

"Not everyone loves our Blago. He could be dead."

"Yes. We need to know that, too."

● Names

As the women leave, the villagers call out. “Who are you?”

Arasely hesitates a moment. “The Women’s Collective,” she answers, remembering Miryam’s poster. Later, she brings it up with the group.

Zimara, too, likes the term. “Collective.” She lets it roll around a bit.

“But what is that?” Mandalika objects. “Who knows what that means?”

“Then we can explain. It’s an important idea, no?” So that’s the name they adopt. And they call their work reunion: bringing moms and kids together, getting them out of harm’s way.

The reunion teams are not the whole of the collective. Not all the women want or need to sneak around the countryside with guns. There’s plenty of other work to do. To distinguish themselves, the fighters start to call themselves the Brigade. The Brigade of the Women’s Collective. All eighteen of them. Even so early they imagine they will become an army.

The villagers, though, know them as the Zimaras.

“Did you hear? The Zimaras came by last night and beat up that pig Gefrets. . . .”

“Did you hear? The Zimaras hijacked a Crusader truck full of medicine. They drove it to Drevnitsa and passed it out for free.” And soon the women of the collective begin to use this simpler title, too.

There’s another, slightly older term already in common usage: Dildos. As in,

Q: “Who killed your family?”

A: “The Dildos did it.”— referring to the Crusaders and their missing parts. Miryam didn’t invent the term, but it inspires her to develop another poster: Dollars for Dildos. For just a few Euros you can provide prostheses for jihadists grieving for their lost manhood. The poster features a balding man in camo, staring into the camera with a look of distress, like one of those sad puppy dogs in a pet adoption ad. An enormous crucifix hangs on his chest; he has slung a rocket launcher on one shoulder, and the hilt of an enormous sword peeks over the other. He clasps his hands over his crotch, clutching something so tiny you have to zoom in to see it. It has a pink smiley face on the end of it.

Once Miryam posts it online this charity turns out to be a surprise moneymaker, with contributions from men and women all over the EU and beyond.

● Leadership Skills

For the Archbishop, exile isn't so bad. He's got a seaside villa just outside Djemdjad, the Kulkhiz capital, courtesy of his Kulkhiz paymasters, and another for the wife and kids. He gets a generous stipend for living expenses, staff and studio for his online programs, and on Sundays a regular guest slot on Kulkhiz Christians Today. They like him there. A real live wire, he brings an engaging kind of jolly savagery to the otherwise mean and stunted viciousness of the pious old men; good for the ratings. Weekdays, a steady stream of clients and business partners flows through, bringing gifts and distributions from myriad extortion, smuggling, and arms deals.

Today he sits at his big desk two-fingering the keyboard. "How does this sound?" he asks Gloria, who is rubbing his neck. "Fighters! Martyrs! One nation under God! . . . ."

Commander Gloria is rather fetching in her high black boots, tight uniform, silver crucifix, and massive ivory-handled revolver. A few very special women have dedicated themselves to the cause of ethnic cleansing and enslaving other women. Gloria is the most glamorous of them all. She poses for posters with a light machinegun under her arm, the strap between her breasts; grants passionate

interviews to rightist celebrity zines in Milan; shouts down the speakers at international human rights meetings; and, when she's in-country, accepts frequent invitations from Crusader bands to put the bullet behind the ear at midnight executions. Afterward the grinning killers pose for photos with Gloria, their boots on a pile of bodies.

"O, I don't think I could," one of her magazine pals tells her, delicately declining an invite to one of these special celebrations. "I don't think it's . . . journalistic objectivity. We just report, you know. We don't take part. But . . . I wonder how it would feel."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Gloria yells at the rights activists and peace envoys. "I am the real Rudeny. I am the women of Rudeny. It's you who are the oppressors, and the Jew pornographers who control you. This is our country and we want you to leave."

For such stellar performances Gloria gets to be top concubine to the top Crusader, the Archbishop himself. What more could a gal ask for? It's light duty— he comes like a panda but not as often. The holy man lifts his tunic and flops on her like a dazed pigeon, then tumbles off, leaving a little curl of come on her thigh. He doesn't mind the bedroom flattery —"O, you big man," etc. etc., but he doesn't need it to get off, as Brother Michael did. O yes, Gloria Dvelko has made the rounds of the Crusader command. No one takes her seriously. But the Archbishop, at least, does not mock her. He doesn't hit her.

Gloria spends most of her time at the screens. Last night she discovered reruns of The Princess of Palm Beach. Gloria thought she had died and gone to heaven. "I'm going to the U.S.A.!" she tells Archbishop Eddie.

"Of course you are," he pats her ass abstractedly. He's got more immediate demands to attend to. His wife just sent him the bill for the kids' school in Geneva. "I can get a KAT6 for less than that," he complains on comm.

"Can you get another Karastepan?" Smeralda threatens, referring to the family that not so long ago owned half the Zalman Valley, and hopes the Crusade will win it back. It was a big coup for Nagahry to marry into this family. He had to outbid an admiral, or was it a pimp?— someone with epaulets. These days he daydreams of simple peasant girls— rosy-cheeked, compliant. "The Russians keep their kids there," Smeralda insists. "All the big narcos. The Patriarch's niece, she's there. The Gali Ghazali grandkids. What? We don't measure up to some penis-head camel driver?"

The Archbishop sighs. He has had his heart set on some major theater at the Athens airport. Last month the Greek secret police doubled the tax on Nagahry's ex-im networks there, and they have no consumer complaint line. Nagahry has other ways to protest, but they are expensive, and now he'll have to postpone.

Patience! He knows from experience that the keys to staying on top are always looking two steps ahead, and waiting for the right moment. Two years, he figures— he'll be back in Saray as the Exarch, maybe as P.M., with a purified military in one pocket and Clean Sparkling in the other. Why get frantic? Half the time it's best just to sit back and let your enemies tear each other apart.

Or your partners. One incentive for the airport adventure is to strengthen his hand with respect to the Kulkhiz government, on the one hand, and Cross and Sword on the other. Lately Brother Michael has been getting all the headlines— so many heroic bombings and massacres. All things being equal, the Kulkhiz generals would much prefer to do business with the Archbishop. Brother Michael's zeal, ambition and contempt for his elders do not foster their trust. But as Nagahry knows, there is always the temptation to cut out the middleman. Nagahry needs to show he can produce results on his own account.

Also, for his own safety, he needs his partners to know that he, too, commands a band of killers just a satlink away.

The little dilemmas of leadership. Archbishop Eddie figures he can manage. He's been doing this a long time. And just now he has a bit of leverage.

It was Gloria who first introduced Nagahry to the Crusader comandante, then a lowly major on Rudeny Army general staff. This was a couple years before the war, and Gloria was interviewing Nagahry for the church journal *Smite the Unbeliever*. Nagahry himself was just a fledgling backwater bishop, making a name for his fiery denunciations of Rudeny's new democratic activists. "Socialist swine!" "Lapdogs of Leninism!" "Christ-killers," and so forth— all the little endearments Gloria was soon to borrow and broadcast to a more international audience.

"You have got to meet this absolutely amazing man!" she told Nagahry. "A simple soldier with a powerful spiritual message." Of course she was sleeping with the paragon. It didn't last. Once the trophy value faded, Major Modrek had no further use for her; Michael doesn't like to share the spotlight, least of all with a woman. Instead, he marked her up a bit, to keep her shy of the cameras. So when Nagahry turned up, Gloria was more than ready for a new sponsor.

All that was a little later. Given Gloria's glowing endorsement, and that of many another One True, naturally Nagahry had to meet this prodigy. The major had just started the Brotherhood of Cross and Sword, a prayer group and death squad for junior officers. Nagahry recalls with satisfaction his first visit to the little chapel at the war college, and how his thunderations electrified the assembled patriots. Others there may remember it a little differently. No matter. What's beyond dispute is that Nagahry and Michael Modrek proclaimed the Crusade within the month, and had an army in two.

More important, Nagahry played a key role in getting the skeptical generals to accept Cross and Sword. "Which do you fear most," he asked them: "loosening the reins a bit on your enthusiastic young men, or letting the democrats loose their godless hell on our suffering nation?"

Strangely enough, it was Brother Michael's own father who wouldn't budge. The former Minister of Industry, former Ambassador to Turkey, hero of the Battle of Bandjikent, even retired he kept a lot of pull with the high command. Nagahry assumed that General Modrek would jump at the chance to promote his son's career.

"Traitorous toad," the General sneered. "Brotherhood! Don't turn your back on him. Blink twice, he'll slit your throat." Nagahry would have loved to learn what tender domestic scenes led to such a conclusion, but daddy slammed the door. Nevertheless, Nagahry can guess at some of it. Modrek senior is one of those bureaucratic killers who take pride in mass murder, but only when it's wrapped in forms and procedures. Such an officer values the happy assassins in his employ, but would never let them share command.

Maybe the Archbishop's biggest service to the Crusade came after the elections, when the Rudeny generals' flight left Cross and Sword without protection. Nagahry arranged safe refuge in Kulkhiz at the fortress monastery of Sankt Rudomil, under a new set of patrons.

Michael knows only too well how much he owes the Archbishop. Regrettably, gratitude is not the prominent part of Michael's make-up. Rather, he experiences obligations as suffocating burdens, unjust and intolerable constraints imposed by a malicious fate. His associates have learned it's not healthy to remind Michael of his debts, moral or material.

Nevertheless, given his friends in the Kulkhiz capital, Nagahry is in a position to insist. Right now he needs new cash to keep afloat his many enterprises. So when he hears the crunch of the gravel in the drive below his window, the Archbishop polishes his palms in anticipation.

"He was short last month," Gloria reminds him.

"He won't be this time,"the Archbishop feels sure. He's prepared to be nasty.

● Big Fan

Damyana adores Zimara. She thinks the bandit chief is the smartest, bravest person she has ever known. She starts to dress like Zimara (easy to do, as Zimara's style might be termed bumpkin hand-me-down); even to walk like her. At first, Arasely and Zimara are pleased to have another woman so enthusiastic about their work. Then, when she realizes Damyana's interest is more personal, Zimara gets irritated.

"I already have two children," she tells Arasely. "If Aloyzi followed me around with puppy-dog eyes, I'd smack him."

"So tell her to back off."

But Zimara does not. She hates to hurt anyone's feelings. She is determined to accept the women as they are. Zimara accepts (with some perplexity, like you might accept the fact of gravity) that her own charisma is what drew some of these women into the Brigade in the first place. Over time, she hopes, they will transfer their loyalty to the group and to the work. "It's not where we start from," she tells her group leaders, "but where we are headed. Are we getting stronger, wiser, more confident? That's our job, you and me, to see that we are all moving forward together."

And Zimara is flattered, no doubt about it. From the time her mother died, Zimara alone has known her own true worth. Her friends in Echmash, the other women of her clan and village, valued her strength and generosity, but did not always understand her. For all that they grew up together, they barely knew each other. They talked little about the great events in their lives— it's dangerous even to think about what you cannot change. Even as they worked together in the fields, each woman stood alone.

So, for Zimara, it's an unaccustomed luxury to have someone around who will always say, "You did a good job," or, "I like what you said today." Arasely does this on occasion, and so do the other leaders, but they are also quick to complain and criticize. Damyana's unquestioning loyalty is a relief. And she's always willing to take on chores that Zimara finds boring— arranging hideouts, finding shelter for new recruits, tracking down group leaders when Zimara needs them (they are spread over two provinces), even cooking when Zimara doesn't have the time. Damyana comes to be seen as Zimara's agent, and maybe a little infatuated with both her boss and her own insider role.

When the other women tease Damyana, Arasely puts a firm lid on it. "If you see someone take an action that hurts our work or puts us at risk, you need to speak up. Can you say Damyana has done that?" No one can offer any examples. "Have you seen Zimara play favorites? Have you seen her do for Damyana anything she won't do for the rest of us? Does she make stupid mistakes because of Damyana?" The women are silent, a little ashamed.

"Otherwise," Arasely concludes, "I don't like to hear women showing disrespect to other women. Aren't you tired of people demeaning women? That's not what we do in the Brigade."

To Damyana, Arasely says (because Zimara won't), "I admire Zimara, too. But it doesn't help for you to treat her special. We're all here to do this work— Zimara, too. Do you understand me?"

Sort of. Damyana dials it down for a while, and then slowly resumes her needy puppy-dog ways.

● Partners

Greb comes in first, carrying a heavy satchel. "Sergeant Major," the Archbishop inclines his head. No one in his right mind ever offers to shake Greb's hand— it's a good way to find yourself on the floor with Greb's knee on your throat. Michael's killer of choice looks around, drops the bag inside the door, and steps out. "Bless you, Sergeant Major," the Archbishop purrs.

Now Brother Michael feels safe to enter. He walks in without a glance at Gloria— no change there. Nagahry greets the Crusader with arms outspread. "My dear boy!"

The holy warrior dreads these visits. It's Nagahry's embrace he hates most— not the big squeeze, but a kind of lingering sway. Nagahry leans in a bit, to put you off balance. You feel his garlic breath on your neck, his belly on yours, sliding up and down ever so slightly. He wants you to feel his need.

At these moments Michael feels caught like a bird by a kitten. Struggling makes it worse. There's no way to wriggle away, short of chopping the older man in the throat. Michael tries to squeeze hard, make him back off, but the Archbishop is too fat to get his arms around. Instead, to calm down, Michael scrolls through mental images of burning schools. His breathing and shoulders relax, he feels the claws retract a bit— then he's free.

These old men and their games. Michael tells himself that no son of General Modrek will be impressed with Nagahry's ministrations. In truth, all these old guys scare him a bit, but he takes care not to show it. As with his father, Michael slips easily into default mode.

"I think you'll be pleased with the Crusade this month, Holy Joy. Here, let me show you." He picks up the satchel Greb brought and drops it on Nagahry's desk with a satisfying thump. It's full of cash, electronics, church silver, and rings from people now missing fingers. Michael lets his own fine long digits linger on the zipper a moment, watching the Archbishop's face; then, as if changing his mind, Michael pulls a flex screen from his jacket and unfolds it.

"May I?"

Nagahry waves it away. "I know the places. Just tell me about your good work."

Instead, God's general pushes aside the machine on the Archbishop's desk and spreads out his map. Gloria, lounging with offensive familiarity in the Archbishop's chair, lazily rolls back to avoid a stack of paper that cascades to the floor.

"We started last month in Soolk Savo," Michael begins, and launches into his report— souls saved, drugs moved, towns taken, mosques burned. Michael has a flair for the dramatic turn of phrase, and you can almost smell the sulphur as he leads his little band of pure-hearts against the endless hordes of hell. He is an accomplished gossip as well, and amidst cosmic storm he serves up little tidbits about priests and bishops —their greed or cowardice or bizarre sexual preferences— that he knows Nagahry will appreciate and make use of later.

The Archbishop licks his lips but resists glancing at the bag bulging with loot. "Sit, please, Brother," Nagahry steers Michael to the sofa. "Commander Dvelko" —that's Gloria— "Would you fetch us some tea?" The Archbishop plunks down next to Michael, knees to knees. But when Gloria brings a tray and drops it with a rattle on the table next to him, their guest doesn't touch the tea and cakes. The Archbishop likes these little cakes, and likes to use visitors as an excuse to indulge. Michael is a bit too sanctimonious for his taste. The Brother just keeps talking— eager to please, or eager to get it over with.

"O, you'll appreciate this, Holy Joy," he likes to say as he introduces some new triumph. He also slips into the torrent certain items of substance.

"Doctor Sevik asked me to tell you personally, your wife's nephew has become a fine addition to our intelligence team. Just last month we were proud to give him the Holy Martyrs citation for bravery— he exposed a whole ring of apostates among our people in Italy. Sad to say, with the recent budget shortfall, we can no longer afford to keep all our envoys in the EU. Rest assured, though, there's plenty of important work for him at the front. We're looking forward to his help with our work here."

If Brother Michael expects the Archbishop to subsidize Smeralda's ne'er-do-well relatives, the Archbishop is happy to correct him. "I'm sure Slivo will be delighted to come home again. I've been worried about the boy, all on his own among the sodomites."

Slivo will hate it. He's got a nice gig now, cruising the emigre bars and cafes in Beograd and Buda, fingering anti-Crusader exiles for Sevik's death squads. Slogging through freezing mud alongside some sweaty jihadists, guns and bombs going off all around, just to rob peasants of family treasures his mum's servants wouldn't piss on— not fit work for a Karastepan.

The way Nagahry sees it, though, a bit of git-down with the rank and file will do the lad good. If Smeralda's sister wants to keep sonny boy out of harm's way, she can bloody well pay for it herself. Of course he, Archbishop Eddie, will be happy to make the arrangements. He'll even give her the sister-in-law discount.

Michael tries another tack. "Look what we found! The men wanted you to have this." From another pocket he takes out something wrapped in soft cloth. It's an Overlay, one of the new electronic wearables. Nagahry tries it on and scans the room. He takes it off and holds it in folded hands. Then he puts it on again, failing to conceal his grin. He's quite sure that no prelate this side of the Vatican has such a toy.

"And where did you find this, my son?"

Michael suppresses a shudder. He's no son of Nagahry, or anyone at all. "They've just set up a new pirate shop in Hidris, with some Chinese engineers. What you're wearing, there's not a molecule's difference between that and something straight out of Shenzhen." As Nagahry goggles about, fiddling with the settings, Michael continues, "You know, the men want to see you more often. Why don't you come to Hidris? Really, their affection for you is quite remarkable. If you can believe it, they've spent the last six weeks fixing up the old guest house at the monastery. Quite luxurious, I'd say. All the amenities. You may find it a little over the top. I told them ostentation is not your style, but when you get there, please don't rebuke them too harshly. Their hearts are in the right place."

Reluctantly, the Archbishop takes off the Overlay and hands it to Gloria. He has no intention of going back to Rudomil. As a young monk, Nagahry spent ten years in that womanless ruin, under the thumb of the grim Abbot and senior monks. "Nothing would delight me more," he says. "Alas, my work here . . . . "

"Very important, I know. But I value the souls of our brave men even more. You know how it is: when it's time to go to battle, they are filled with the Spirit. Afterwards, back in the barracks, they are tired and idle and the devil slips in. We try to keep them busy, but they need firm spiritual direction. Please, pray on it. Come back with me. Be a father to these fine young men."

The other thing about the monastery is that Michael's men control it completely. The Archbishop is not going to place himself so meekly in Michael's power. Nor does he find enticing the prospect of spending the rest of his days among a bunch of ignorant, horny, murderous teenagers.

"I feel humble to have their love. No doubt the Lord will call me there soon. First, though, some other bits of the Lord's business to resolve. That matter in Obeyyed . . . ."

Brother Michael nods. "Of course. You asked me to reorganize the church there, and I'm happy to report that the old corruptor is no longer with us." The bishop there had arranged to bus out the Jews and Muslims before the Crusader onslaught.

"Very good, thank you. As you know, I've spoken to Father Kisheshnik about it, and praise the Lord, he's willing to take on the burden."

Michael inclines his head toward one shoulder. "Perhaps we could save the Father for another task. The Obeyyed priests chose one of their own, Sranyalits. He's been very active in our work, a real fire-breather."

"I'm sure I spoke to you about Father Kisheshnik."

"What can I do?" the Crusader asks. "The Holy Spirit moved them to elect another. It's the will of God."

"Ah, the will of God. Who can dispute that?" Nagahry nods thoughtfully, and concludes without warmth, "Fine job yet again, Brother Michael. Please convey to the men our great love and affection. And we have something for them, too, right off the boat from Batumi." He holds up a key card. "You know the warehouse off the north highway. You'll find more than enough to see you through the campaign season, courtesy of our Kulkhiz friends."

Michael takes the card. "This will cheer the men immensely— not just the supplies, but knowing your faith in them." He makes to get up, but the Archbishop puts a hand on his knee.

“Before you go, Brother, a small favor to set an old man’s mind at ease.” Nagahry has maybe fifteen years on the Crusader boss.

“How can I help?”

"Tell me, what's this I hear about Captain Blago going missing? He's one of your stalwarts, no? Is he on vacation? Tending a sick child?” Nagahry pauses, leans back, folds his hands over his belly. “Or do we have here another case of divine intervention?”

Michael opens his mouth, and closes it again. Archbishop Eddie does like the little surprises. "It's true, the Captain hasn't reported back since he went out on personal business last month. That's unusual for him, and we're worried about it. There may have been some kind of attack."

"An attack? Who would dare?"

"We don't know. His men love him. In the villages . . . some families may have reason to think of him unkindly." Michael cracks a smile, almost painfully, and spreads his hands. "I would have mentioned it, but as you know, we like to take care of our little problems before we bring them to you."

The Archbishop smiles back. "But my son, that's what I'm here for. To help with the problems." Nagahry taps Michael’s knee. "I can't imagine that Blago is huddling with some Rudeny spy somewhere, sketching out the strong points of the Monastery, so they can bomb it."

That was Michael’s first thought, too, but he denies it hotly. "Certainly not. God would strike him down."

"Good, then. I accept your assurance. There must be some other traitor." The Archbishop puts a finger to his forehead as if remembering something, then goes to his desk and rifles through the drawers. He finds a faded, dirty sheet, unfolds it. Michael stands, angling to get a look. The Archbishop gazes a moment, drops it on the desk and turns it to his visitor. It's the "Where's Blago?" poster.

"What is this 'Women's Collective'?"

Michael laughs, too loudly. "Silly, isn't it? We've heard of some women, shouting about their rights, something like that. We don't take it seriously."

"Could this have anything to do with the story that Blago bungled a job on a woman, and went back after her, and hasn't been heard from since? Blago and . . . " Nagahry drums his fingers, "Sejad and Ratko. Good men. Anything to that story?" Gloria, standing by the door with her arms folded, watches curiously and with malice.

Michael adopts an utterly impassive face. "We heard he was looking for a woman at the refugee camp. You know they have been a big thorn in our side. But also a good source of revenue." He shrugs. "Whether he found her or not, she's not there any more. She may have nothing to do with what happened. It's hard to imagine.”

“Astounding.”

“We're working on it. We will find out, and justice will be done."

The Archbishop picks up the poster again. "Doesn't seem silly to me. Seems like a slap in the face. An insult to our brave warriors."

Michael is not smiling now. "As I said. I will take care of it."

● Ambush

With every new recruit, and before every raid, Zimara emphasizes how important it is to prepare thoroughly— contact the women in a village, watch the target family, map out Crusader positions and alternate escape routes, and many other tasks. But good prep comes at a cost. Sometimes there's an immediate threat to a woman or child, and the reunion team has to act fast. That works the first few times, because the Crusaders don't expect it.

It's also risky for a woman from New Start to sneak back into a village and contact her friends. The more time she spends in the village, the better the information and help she can get; but she's also more

likely to be spotted by some snitch or the Crusaders themselves. This work is stressful and hazardous. There is a temptation to charge in without much information and trust to surprise and their guns.

Berenika's team runs into a hail of gunfire on a forest road near Strelss. Berenika dies instantly. Somehow Rosika, herself pierced in lung and shoulder, manages to pull Berenika's body into the middle of the seat while Taissa gets behind the wheel. Still under heavy fire, Taissa turns the car around and tears back down the road. Rosika nearly dies before they can get her to the surgery at New Start, two days later.

Berenika is the first Brigade member to die. When she hears about it, Zimara dispatches Arasely to find out what happened. "Take your time. Come back," she insists.

"The killers will be celebrating," Arasely answers grimly. "They won't see me." Arasely has come to display a certain talent for moving around without being noticed, and for gathering information.

"Take Taissa with you."

• Search

"The fucker knows about Blago," Brother Michael reports in a fury. "And you haven't found him."

On comm, Sevik says, "All we know is what I told you before. Some dispute over a betrothal. Blago took a couple men to New Start to settle it. No one has seen him since. Flem has had guys looking at this for weeks."

"I'm going to send Greb."

"No need, Michael. Don't do it."

"Clearly there is a need. Where is my captain?"

"Think about it, Michael. Greb knows everything about you. Do we want him out of your sight, messing around in Kut's back yard? Or was this his idea?"

"Greb knows nothing," Michael retorts. They both know it's a silly statement.

"Look, I've already got a guy in Saray. I'll send him money. That may open some doors. Also, we should think about hitting the camp itself. It's a pesthole of apostates and foreign corruptors. That foul slave Avbury. Time to kill her, I think."

The thought of striking back calms the Brother. "OK, you draw up a plan. No action yet, understand? Those payments they make for women to go home— that's good for us."

"Still. They must be warned. How about the translator?"

"That's fine. More than that, we wait. Nothing else until we find Blago."

• Post Mortem

Arasely reports back about the ambush at Strelss. The women meet in the back of tobacco shop in Obeyyed market. They helped the owner get his daughters to New Start.

"Berenika's team went to get Taissa's friend Franka. At the last minute Franka sent word that she had changed her mind, she wasn't leaving. Berenika figured Franka was just scared, and they should bring her out anyway. They were concerned she wouldn't be safe if they left her behind."

"They didn't try to contact Franka again, or just watch the house?"

Arasely shrugs. "They'd already spent four days on the outskirts. They were worried someone would spot them. They wanted to get Franka and get out."

Mandalika asks, "Who were the shooters?"

"Franka's brothers and their pals. Rosika and Taissa were very lucky not to get killed themselves. Apparently some enthusiast opened fire before the car had gone into the full exposure zone."

"What about a backup car? We tell them, always have a second vehicle."

"Wouldn't have helped. It was just a one-lane road. It would have just blocked the escape."

Zimara admits, "We have to rethink how we do things."

"We make mistakes. We've been lucky up to last week. These are the risks we run."

Mandalika says, "Makes the women uneasy."

Zimara replies, "Me too."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, they're wondering if they should quit. They've had enough."

"Enough?"

"When they joined us, they wanted to be heroes. The men can run around with guns, why not us? Now it's getting real."

"That's not why you joined?"

"It is," Mandalika agrees. "Sounded like fun."

"So? Do you want to back out?"

"Hell, no."

"Why not?"

Mandalika grins. "I hate those bastards. I want to kill them. How about you?"

"I hate them for what they did to me to my kids. All these kids. If I could make them safe without shooting Dildos, I'd do it. I'm not sad that's not an option."

Arasely points out, "No one has quit yet. If that's what they decide, so be it. But we need a chance to talk about it."

"They talk too much. They chatter like magpies," Mandalika remarks. She's not exactly Sphinx-like herself.

"But not in the open," Zimara says. "Not all together. That's always been our problem. We've got teams of women scattered all over the countryside. We never get a chance to figure out things together."

Arasely says, "Berenika's family wants the body."

"That's brave. Will the Crusaders let them bury her?"

"We should have a ceremony."

"What do you mean?"

Arasely picks her words carefully. "If we continue this work, more women will die. We know that. We need to honor them."

Mandalika gets it now. "Right. Because we belong to each other. We don't forget."

"I don't know how we could do that," Zimara says.

"Let me go to Berenika's village," Arasely offers. "Let me find out more."

"We'd need a safe place. We control all entry and exit."

"If I can guarantee you a place for, say, six hours, would that do?"

"Better make it twelve, dusk to dawn. Safe!"

● Errand

Arasely hesitates to bring up another issue, but she's the only one who can.

"Zimara, I know you're getting ready to go back to Echmash. And I promised to go with you. But I can't go, and neither can you. It's not safe for either of us. You think Berenika was careless, and put her whole team at risk. That's what you'll be doing if you go to Echmash."

Zimara is fuming. Her hands bunch into fists. Anyone but Arasely, she would just walk away. After a minute, she masters her voice. "You told me yourself that Yorg brought my kids back from Kulkhiz. A good husband at last, did just what I told him. He wouldn't do that if he wasn't ready to let me have them."

Mandalika says, "He used them as bait once before."

“Blago used them as bait, and Yorg warned me, and I shot Blago in the throat,” she chops at her own, “and chopped off his head.”

“And there’s Filipa’s husband and my father-in-law,” Arasely insists, “and a dozen more who will raise the alarm if they see you or me. It’s too dangerous, not just for us, but for Gret and Aloyzi.”

“I’ll do it,” Mandalika says. “Of course I’ll do it. You and Arasely tell me the layout. I’ll take Nisibis and couple more. No problem.” She grips Zimara’s arm. “Your kids will be fine.”

Zimara rifles through her backpack, comes up with a silver cross and chain. “Wait till Yorg’s away, so he won’t have to play the big man again. Give this to Yorg’s new wife. She’ll know I sent you.”

“What’s this?”

“Dubravka is Blago’s auntie. And this is his favorite jewelry."

• Tantrum

Captains Rahday and Skhrote have brought their men back in triumph from the third liberation of Chernu Mos. Rather than jubilant, they are exhausted. They've raped and beaten and murdered to their hearts' content, and now they drag in, wiped, a bit stunned. All they want to do now is sleep, then pack and go home for the winter. Instead, Brother Michael calls them out at dawn, to shiver in their underwear under the pitiless stare of Rudomil’s stone demons.

As he paces up and down the ranks, Michael waves the poster and screams, “How many of you knew about this? How many?” They don’t need to look. They’ve seen the poster. “Where’s Blago?” it says.

“Are you women? To let women insult your captain?”

He slaps a soldier, who staggers. Michael hits him again, in the throat. When the man drops to the ground, Michael kicks him until he stops moving. Michael straightens his tunic. "If you didn't know about this, I'll sack the lot of you. If you did know, why haven't you stopped it? Our Lord died for you, and you let women menstruate on his bloody cross. Where is your manhood?

“OK. Here is how you will atone. You go back home. Find the collaborators and kill them. Shoot five at least in every village. Then you send me their names. I'll expect a report by the end of the month.”

The captains and their men stand very still. They dare not look away from their commander, but they feel an urgent need to see what their buddies are doing. Up and down the line eyes are rolling off center then jiggling back like pinballs. It's one thing to shoot people the other side of the valley, another to kill your neighbors. They see your wife and kids every day. They know when you come and go. They know your shop, your barn, your livestock. They all have big families, and they all have guns. Village life is never very serene, at best a shaky truce among feuding families. It doesn't take much to upset that.

Michael kicks the body at his feet. "Now clean up this mess."

“It was awful,” Yesenya comms the next day. She and Vlasta watched Michael’s tantrum from the toilets in Barracks C, where they were cleaning. “What is wrong with that guy?”

“Have you seen this man before?” Zimara asks.

“Yes. They call him Brother Michael. They are all afraid of him.”

So the Crusader rank and file don't like this order. When they go home, a few do execute their neighbors. Since they don't really know who has been collaborating with the Brigade, the Crusaders just pick the people they don't like, or people with the least social support, and march them to the village square to shoot them. The archangelic order means a sudden rise in the mortality rate for widows with good land.

Most of the Crusaders dither, kill maybe one or two. Their kids hate them, the priests warn them, they sleep with machine guns at bedside. And they start getting messages on their comms: “Modrek’s order is a sin. We will punish those who carry it out. THE WOMEN’S COLLECTIVE.” One officer barely escapes his burning home. Another snorts a bullet as he reels home from a bar. Several suddenly recall urgent business in Kulkhiz.

More women find a way to contact the Zimaras. Some men do too, including a few Crusaders not sure what Brother Michael will demand next. It's best to have options.

All the same, Michael’s crackdown makes it even harder for the Brigade to operate in Crusader territory.

● The Professional

Zimara finds him under a van in a garage in Saray. “Karastepan?”

The priest slides out from under, and looks up in surprise at the intense woman with the gun. “You’re coming with me,” she says. “Someone wants a priest, don’t ask me why.”

He stands and wipes his hands with a cloth. “It’s OK,” he tells his shopmates, who have begun to edge away.

They put him in the front seat, next to Filipa. Zimara sits in back with the gun in her lap.

Karastepan looks back at her curiously. He figures he has nothing to lose. "Why am I here?" he asks.

Filipa tells him, "We need you for a funeral."

"Someone else’s I hope. I’m joking!" Zimara's face suggests that she is not. The priest ventures, "You want me to do this right, I need the proper gear. My vestments, candles, holy water, things like that."

"Yeah, all the things Jesus had," Filipa replies.

"You’ll have to improvise," Zimara tells him. After a while she asks, “What are you doing fixing cars?”

He nods. Lots of people want to know, but don’t ask. “You know Obeyyed? Monastery there, they had the biggest collection of Moradzich manuscripts in the world. I was the archivist. Good at it, too. I restored more damaged books than all my predecessors combined.” The priest pauses, wondering how to put this. He doesn’t know who these women are. “When the Crusaders came, they didn’t understand about the books. They think monks should keep the Bible and some prayer books, and that’s all. All these old things, poems and stories, in their eyes, all that is profane— spiritual poison. They burned it all. Well, some of the books had covers sewn in gold thread. They tore those off first. Everything else . . . so I was out of a job.”

“I know how to read,” Zimara boasts.

“So maybe you understand about the books.”

“I understand some people care about them. Just paper to me.”

He tries to read her. He thinks she’s lying. “And you? What was your fire?”

She ignores the question, and asks another. “There are a hundred churches. Why the garage? Atoning for your sins?”

Karastepan laughs. “Fixing cars is a lot easier than fixing souls, not least my own. Anyway, the bishop here, he’s afraid of the Crusaders. I did nothing to challenge them, I admit, but for one moment I was in their way.” He raises a hand in mock benediction. “’Have you thought of Bulgaria?’” he imitates the bishop’s fluting voice. “’There’s nothing for you here.’” He drops his hand.

Zimara nods and curls the gun up against her belly.“I know Bishop Gorj, too.” She looks out the window.

Mandalika laughs when she hears about it. “You got a Karastepan!”

“So?”

“Richest family in Rudeny, or near enough. Well, we’ll give Berenika a good send-off.”

● Exchange Rate

Lieutenant Djordjevich finds Kut in what he calls his studio: the basement of an old office building in Saray, crammed with cables and monitors and electronics of all sorts— the heart of the Captain's surveillance and database empire. The Lieutenant headed the clean-up crew that found a shady grove for Blago to lay his weary head —it kept trying to roll away from the rest of him— and is thus somewhat familiar with Zimara’s crazy enterprise. He tells his boss, “Cannon fodder name of Smegim poking around Saray, asking about Blago and the others. Seems to think we had something to do with Blago's vanishing act.”

Kut can’t recall exactly: “Do we pay him?” The Captain pays informants all over the country, including plenty of Crusaders, in positions high and low. Some would like to get Kut on *their* payroll.

“No. Far as we know, he's a true blue Cru, another snitch for your pal Sevik.”

“Classmate.”

“Church school, was it? All the boys in their little blue shorts. We could pull this guy in, but I don't think he'll turn.”

“Has he found Zimara?”

“Not yet. What do you want to do?”

Kut speculates, “What could we get if we gave Zimara to the Dildos?”

“It would let you off the hook, to start with. Sevik thinks you had a hand in Blago’s, aah, spiritualization, he'll send the dirty boys. What’s his name, Flem. Then I get to run the PoPo.”

“So glad for you.” Kut folds hands over his belly and props his feet on the desk, thinking. Now and then Zimara sends useful data his way, thanks to the cousin in Hidris. He thinks she has learned a lot more than she’s telling. Why should she? “Tell you what. We’re going to give this guy to Zimara. Let her deal with him.”

“Why buy what you can get for free?” It’s a common saying. Rudenyans are known throughout the world (well, among smugglers and international aid agencies) for being stingy and lazy. They always look for short cuts.

“Something any aspiring commander should always keep in mind.”

“We don’t know where Zimara stays. How do I reach her?” Djordjevich asks.

“She talks to the people at New Start. The translator will know.”

“Miryam.”

“Tell her to have Zimara call us.”

Zimara sends a team to pick up Sevik’s spy. When Arasely gets back from Berenika’s village, she and Smegim have a little chat.

● Emiliyes, Araselys, Berenikas

Berenika’s parents have a farm outside Manomekhlis. They buried her in the woods in secret, so that the One Trues wouldn’t come and desecrate the grave. Instead of a gravestone, they’ll let friends and family clip flowers, photos, candles, and messages to a grief-twisted threepenny tree at the base of the hillside. They’ve set up tents and tables around a fire pit for when the guests arrive.

Zimara gets there a bit early, to check on security, and to meet the parents; Taissa introduces them. Zimara doesn't know what to say, but in their grief, they do.

"Thank you for coming. Berenika looked up to you."

"I'm afraid I didn't know her very well. She was brave, and the other women trusted her. But I don't know about her life. Can you tell me, what brought her to do this work?"

"You know why," the dad says.

"Really, I don't. I think women have lots of reasons. It's a little different for each of us."

The mom takes a breath. "At first it was you. O, the brave hero! Stand up to the killers! We heard all about it. She wanted to be like you." She hesitates. "I hated you for that. Now, to look at you— goatsbreath, I expected a two-meter Viking in steel breastplates!" She puts her hand over her mouth, embarrassed. Zimara smiles with half her mouth. The mom continues, "But then I think she saw it was the best way to help Vardan. You know her boy? He's running around out there, you'll see him. 'Look what you're doing to him!' I told her."

"You yelled," her husband amends.

"Yes. And you! But Berenika . . . she likes to follow her own path." She stops for a moment to grind the heel of her hands in her eyes, and shakes her head.

"And why do you help us now?"

Mr. Beyubrk says, "Berenika had a good idea. Not my idea. But a good idea— beautiful, even. And these last few months, she became even more of herself. You know what I mean?"

"No, but I'd like to."

Mom nods to her partner, "We talked about this," and tries to explain. These are some of the things they say to the guests a little later.

Outside more visitors arrive— the Zimaras, of course, but also several cousins and friends from the village, mostly younger, those willing to risk retaliation by the Crusaders. They bring bags and boxes of food. Berenika's parents go out to greet them. Father Karastepan is there, too. He's young but Zimara can tell he has had practice; he brings just the right mix of warmth and gravity to the sad occasion. She notices too that he is at once intimidated and intrigued by all the women with weaponry.

Several kids have come, too. Zimara notices a boy in shorts, rushing around the edge of the crowd, dropping now and then to his knees in the grass, and making secret signs with his hands. "Berenika's child," Taissa says.

"Spooky," Zimara judges.

More cars and trucks drive up, parking to one side of the farmhouse. Zimara collects several fighters and heads to the wooded slopes, to relieve the watchers who have been there since morning. Thus she doesn't see Rekady and Miryam pull in. The women haven't see these two since the refugee camp, and greet them with great affection. They have brought a message for Berenika's parents from her teammate Rosika, who is recovering at New Start. After a round of embraces Arasely pulls Miryam to one side. They walk and talk.

"And Zimara? Where is she?" the translator wonders.

"She'll be here. She wants to see you. She's a little distracted today, don't be put off by it."

"The group hasn't lost anyone before."

Arasely shakes her head. "Something else. Mandalika went to get Aloyzi and Gret a couple days ago. We haven't heard from them. Maybe today."

"That's wonderful. I'm sure it will be OK."

"We've had other news." Miryam looks at her. "The upshot is, don't leave New Start unless we send an escort. In fact, we'll send someone back with you tomorrow."

"What's going on? Should I get a gun?"

"Do you know how to use one?"

"Maybe you could show me."

"We'll find you a gun," Arasely says.
"What about Avbury?"
"Apparently she's off limits for the time being."
"How do you know all this?"
"We can say a sinner has repented."

It's a cloudy day, and getting dark. Karastepan gathers the crowd by the threepenny tree, and starts the service. The ancient words roll across the fields and forest. Fireflies rise and dip in the grass. A hundred meters above, Zimara and Lemane watch in silence, remembering too many dead.

They see a stir at the edge of the field. Someone is pushing through the crowd. Karastepan, in the middle of Let us pray, sees the commotion and gestures the newcomers forward. It's Gret and Aloyzi, darting among the adults, looking for Zimara, and followed by Mandalika with her purposeful long stride. Zimara hands the binoculars to Lemane and touches her on the shoulder. Lemane nods, smiling through her tears, and Zimara takes off down the hill.

"Whose children are these?" the priest asks. "Zimara's! Truly?" He points to the tiny figure plunging down the hillside. "There's your mom— Run!" The kids see her and charge ahead. The three collide in a tumble of arms and breathless laughter. The priest bellows the first lines of "God's embrace." He has a fine voice. As it echoes back from the hills the congregants respond, tremulous at first, then stronger, pushing back against sorrow and death. Miryam and Arasely capture Mandalika, whose face is bruised but her teeth flash in the twilight.

The priest manages to finish the mass, seeming not too upset at the extra-liturgical drama. Afterwards the crowd mills around, grazing off the food on the tables. Gret and Aloyzi are squeezed tight by dozens of strangers; they wonder how their mom knows all these people. The clouds have thinned and the sky is still light, but the Beyubrks distribute flashlights and lead the crowd by a narrow path past the woods to a field by the silver ribbon of river. Here they have built a new greenhouse, not quite finished. Colored pennants flutter from the scaffolding. Berenika's parents show them the seedling trays and spray pumps, the thermostats and powerline, the tools and fertilizer in one corner.

"There's a big market for flowers in the EU," Berenika's mom explains. "We hear you can make a lot of money. So we built this for Berenika and Vardan. She always loved flowers. We were trying to entice Berenika back." She has to stop there. She is holding Berenika's boy Vardan by the hand. She turns to him and kneels on one knee. He wraps his arms around her neck.

Out in the field again Mr. Beyubrk continues. "So Berenika's back. She won't see the flowers, but the people in Europe will, and we hope they'll pay lots and lots of money." He looks around. "We thought, well, maybe we can do something to keep Berenika's work going. There are a lot of Berenikas out there. Lots of Vardans. So, look. We are going to give this to the Collective. I mean we'll run it, and we'll give you the money." His wife stands up and takes his hand. "That's all," he says.

The visitors cluster around and shake their hands and thank them. Then it's Taissa's turn to talk about Berenika.

"You're next, you know," Arasely tells Zimara, who is sitting in the grass with her children. She has not let them go since she first saw them. They are quiet now, all a little shocked at the changes they see in each other. The boy and girl are bigger, and wary. They can't take their eyes off Zimara, who looks and sounds so different. It's unsettling to see the familiar expressions play across a stranger's face.

"I can't. My voice," Zimara protests.
"No excuses." Arasely passes her a hand mike.
"You will pay for this."
"Do it, mom," Gret tells her.
"Yes, my darling girl."

So when Taissa's done Zimara makes her way to the front of the group. A greenhouse lamp catches the broken ridges on her cheek.

"Sisters and brothers!" she says, and clears her throat, raising the mike, and says it again more loudly. "Berenika couldn't be here with us today. We are here together. To be complete, we want our sister here." She falters, and resumes.

"Berenika can't be here with us, but we remember her. Mother, daughter, sister, fighter. Our sister! The women and children she brought to safety, they remember her. Rosika can't be here either, but she's in hospital and they tell me she's going to be OK.

"Berenika brought us here today. This is the first time we are all together since New Start. I saw Miryam just now, where is she? There she is. And Rekady. I see our kids playing in the fields under our sisters' watchful eyes. This is how it should be. How can we make this world safe for these children and all children? This," she spreads her arms, "this is what Berenika fought for. Can this be the last time we are together?"

"No!"— a voice from the crowd.

"Berenika's dying pierced us deeply. But it's her life we honor and celebrate and learn from. What do you think? Do you think she was afraid? She was! Like you, like me. But when she saw Taissa's friend in trouble, she rushed in to help —not alone! Because we are not alone— but with Rosika and Taissa. She knew that in helping another woman she was helping her own family. Vardan. Please, Vardan, could you come here?"

Mrs. Beyubrk nods and the boy edges up, head bent slightly as if expecting a blow.

A hand on his shoulder, Zimara turns him to the crowd. "Vardan, I want to make sure everyone meets you. You know we're here because we love your mom. And Aloyzi, Gret— " They step forward shyly. "It's OK. Vardan, these are my kids. I am so happy to see them! Would you— " They know what to do, and shake hands gravely. "OK. Thank you, Vardan." She lets him go and he rushes back to his grandmother. Zimara nods to Mandalika, who enfolds the other two in her arms.

"Look. My mom did everything she could to protect us, and it wasn't enough. Her mom tried to protect her, and spent half her life in a factory overseas. My sister died in childbirth, in part because the generals looted their own Health Ministry. We know it doesn't work to say, I'm just going to look after my own family. We have to help each other. It's the only way. Can this be the last time we are together?"

"No!"

"Why can't we just stay here in Manomekhlis?" one woman calls.

Zimara nods. "What's the answer to that?" She looks from one family to another. "What's the answer?"

"The Crusaders will attack us!"

"And what's the answer to that?"

"Fight!"

"With what? How can we?"

"Guns! Money!"

"I'll get you guns and money. But there's something even more important."

"Courage!"

"You have more courage than anyone. My mother had courage. It's not enough. Remember your training."

"Stick together."

"Right. Stick together, and divide the killers."

Damanya calls, "Of course we'll stick with you."

Zimara shakes her head. "I don't ask you to fight for me. I don't ask you to fight for Berenika. We can't help her. Fight for Vardan, and your own children, and the children you used to be: afraid and

hopeful. We are children no longer, we are women and men. It's up to us to make this right, make the world safe for these kids.

"Can we do it? How? Don't answer right away. This is a real question."

The listeners shift their feet and look at each other. One woman calls, "We're the Zimaras."

"What?"

"We are the Zimaras!" She says it louder, as if that answers the question.

"What's your name? Are you Nika?"

"Nevenka."

"Ah. So we are the Nevenkas."

People laugh.

"Yes? We are the Nevenkas."

"We are the Nevenkas!" they agree.

"We are the Emiliyes, right? We are the Araselys!" They go through the list, getting louder. People laugh as they shout their own names.

"We are the Berenikas— "

"We are the Berenikas!" they shout, weeping; anguished, angry, determined.

It's dark now, and they pick their way back along the path, following the few with flashlights. The Beyubrks have gone ahead, to make sure another round of food hits the tables by the tree before the crowd returns. Rekady spots Zimara and hurries to catch up. "You must be Aloyzi," he says. "You're famous!" He hands the boy a flashlight with the head of a dinosaur, and glittering eyes. "And Gret. My name is Rekady. I'm sorry, that's the only wild beast I have with me, but I'll find you another in Saray."

"What are you doing here?"

Rekady can't see Zimara's face. Her voice betrays as little as possible. "Nice to see you, too. Miryam told me about the funeral and I thought I'd give her a ride. It's been a long time since I've seen people."

"People?"

"Yeah. Arasely, Mandalika, what's her name, Taissa . . . people. You know," he says to Gret, "your mom is famous. That's right! People know her everywhere. She is the worst driver in Rudeny!"

Gret looks up. "You can drive?"

"Very well. Don't listen to this guy."

"And guess who taught her," he says. "Me. But she quit after three lessons."

"Six."

"I tell you, the roads are a lot more dangerous since she got behind the wheel." The kids are more confused than ever. But it seems OK. It all seems OK.

When they get back to the farmhouse, Zimara and a few of the women settle around a table in the kitchen. Zimara has set up a council of sorts, the four women she trusts most, plus four more they nominate. Because of Miryam's key role with the refugees at New Start, Zimara brings her in too. There's no question who's boss, but Zimara doesn't always get her way.

Katerin says, "This priest Karastepan wants to talk to you."

"Miryam and Rekady will take him back to Saray."

"He wants to stay."

"Excuse me?"

"He wants to join the Brigade."

"No."

"He did a good job today," Arasely points out.

"I don't want him. We don't need him."

"You're wrong," Lemane argues. "Not everyone is like you. A lot of our women, they want this connection."

"And you?"

"That's not fair. Don't turn it on me. I'm telling you what we hear from the women."

"I apologize. I'll talk with him."

"I'll go with you," Arasely decides.

"Fine. Now, can we deal with some real questions? Such as, where do we go from here?"

"Clearly the women trust us," Emiliye says. "Whatever we agree on here, I think they'll stick with us."

"That's not what I want." Zimara is adamant. "I won't take that responsibility. If we continue this work, we must have a chance to talk about it and decide together. All of us. If they want to keep the Brigade, they have got to do it for themselves, not for us."

The women go back and forth.

"We said goodbye to Berenika,"Arasely points out. "It's going to get harder. We could lose more of our brothers and sisters. Everyone has to understand this. Zimara's right."

Another pressing question: can they continue as a kind of gang wandering the countryside? Or should they find a place and take a stand?

Zimara sums up. "OK. Clearly we have some big decisions to make. We need to bring everyone together, someplace safe, with time enough to say everything that needs to be said."

"And if we do continue," Mandalika points out, "we've got to rethink how we do the reunion work. Tighten it up. This is dangerous, we all know that, but that mess in Strelss should not have happened. We can't afford to lose good people to carelessness."

"This is my fault," Zimara says. "I thought it would be enough to bring the new women along with us a couple of times, they would see how it works, then set them out to do their own. I gave Berenika a group and sent them out before they were ready." Ever since she heard about Berenika's death, Zimara has known that she has to say this. No one disagrees. "So we should put together a training for this meeting I'm talking about. Something we can keep using as new members join the Brigade. Mandalika, you're the obvious choice. You've got the experience. Draw something up, will you? I don't know, a handbook."

"I don't know how to write, Zee."

"So you pick someone to work with. Right? OK. What about a place to meet?" They bat around a few ideas.

Miryam figures, "All these women, if you need more than a few hours, it's got to be somewhere in government territory."

"That's no better than here," Emiliye thinks. "As far as the government is concerned, we're just bandits. They'd arrest us."

Arasely looks pointedly at Zimara. "Actually, we've had help from time to time."

Zimara nods. "We've been talking with a cop in Saray. Not about the Brigade, but about Crusaders. We trade information now and then." This is news to the other women.

"Shouldn't you have told us?" Two or three ask this question.

"Tell you the truth, I didn't know where it was going. Up to now, this has been very small scale. The main reason is that I won't endanger one of our main sources. Arasely knows who. I'm sorry, I don't want anyone else to know."

Iskra says, "That makes sense. I trust you."

Tamar says, "I trust you, but we ought to know how you make these decisions. What you do affects all of us."

"Seems this is another thing we have to talk about," Zimara admits. "Let's put it on the list."

Arasely says, "This cop, he helped us with a threat very recently." Now Miryam understands the source of the warning earlier that day.

"Question is, if we met in Saray, could he protect us?"

"And what would it cost?" Emiliye adds.

"I know who you mean," Miryam says. "Let me open the conversation with him. Then you can deal with him direct."

Zimara explains to the others: "It's the Captain in the PoPo. You may have seen him nosing around New Start."

Arasely: "He made sure there was no trail after Blago departed this vale of tears."

"Trust a cop!" Katerin shakes her head.

"I'd say it depends on what we have to offer in return," Arasely replies. "Let's ask at least. Shall we ask Miryam to make contact?" That's the consensus, and Miryam agrees. "And help us think about a place, a big place we can use," Arasely suggests.

As the others head out in search of food, Zimara gestures at Mandalika to stay. "I'm going to Strelss. I want you to come with me. Can you put together a team?"

Mandalika raises her eyebrows.

"These vicious men," Zimara explains. "They have to learn they can't fuck with us."

"Won't be hard to find volunteers. What are we going to do about Franka? This is her fault."

"I don't care about Franka. We don't kill women for being stupid and afraid."

"We can call it the education team," Mandalika jokes. She lifts her nose and raises her hand like a schoolmarm with a marker. "Settle down now. Our lesson for the day: Don't fuck with the Brigade."

They will go to educate Berenika's killers. One, two, three, four. It will take two nights and a day. Two of the men get away unseen, racing to Kulkhiz.

Damyana sidles up to Arasely as she leaves the farmhouse. "What happened? What were you talking about?"

"Mainly all the things we have yet to figure out. I think we'll try to meet again soon, to come to some decisions."

"Can we keep the priest?"

"Don't know yet. Zimara's going to talk to him."

"We should keep the priest. We are doing holy work, even if Zee won't admit it."

"She is stubborn."

Damnyana smiles and touches her chest. "She acts tough but I know inside she's a holy person."

"I'm going to meet with her and the priest now." Arasely tries to outpace Damyana, but it's not working, so she slows almost to a stop.

"Good, good! Let me go with you."

"Probably best not to have too many cooks on this one. We'll let everyone know."

"I should have been there."

"Where?"

"In the kitchen. With the leaders."

"Damyana, you are not a group leader."

"I should be a leader. I've been with the Brigade from the beginning, as long as you, longer than most of these others."

"We all have different roles to play. We all contribute to this work. Do you think this work is important?"

"You know I do."

"Do you think every woman is important?"

"Of course." They leave it at that.

When Arasely catches up to her, Zimara is already questioning the priest. It sounds more like a scolding.

"We have serious work to do here. Why should we accept you?"

"Maybe you can use a good mechanic."

Zimara doesn't smile. "Do you fuck?"

He's a little flustered. "I'm a priest," he says, as if that explains anything.

"I'll let you stay. But: if the women want your help, they have to ask. And if you want to fuck somebody, you ask them direct. Don't pull this, 'I'm a man of God, if you do all the work it's not really a sin for me.' Don't hide behind your tunic."

Karastepan protests: "I'm not that way. I would never— "

"And leave the children alone." Zimara turns to Arasely. "You want this man? OK. He's your responsibility. I don't want to hear any complaints, understand?" Grudgingly, she tells the priest, "You did a good job tonight."

Arasely tells him, "Get your gear. I'll meet with you later." When he's gone, she complains to Zimara. "That was harsh."

"Eh. If he sticks around after that, I'll feel better about him."

Very early in the morning, as they are packing to leave, Arasely reports that a couple of Berenika's cousins have asked to join the Brigade as well. A man and a woman. Manomekhlis isn't safe for them any more. "Berenika wanted to make it safe for everyone," they told Arasely. "We can help."

"A man?" Damyana objects. "That will mess up everything."

Zimara is too tired to think. "And your priest? Bring them along. We'll figure it out." Turns out the Beyubrks have kin in a dozen villages nearby; over time, they become the backbone of the network in this province.

§ BRIGADE

• Fyodor Smiles Down from Heaven

Spurning centuries of tradition, the new government lets anyone into the children's hospital at Poprechny Poot. When a local politician finds out the doctors there have been draining the blood of Christians to give to girls and Muslims, he leads a band of outraged citizens to the gates. They manage to dismember a pair of security guards, but much to their disappointment, and the defenders' pleased surprise, the rest of the guards do not run away, and are quickly joined at the gate by a dozen doctors and nurses, brandishing repurposed medical supplies with an unprofessional ferocity. The champions of the holy hemoglobin call a tactical retreat, bearing away them little Fyodor, the only casualty, who in a fit of misplaced enthusiasm has shot off his only penis.

Unwilling to go back to the hospital and risk sharing his sacred bodily fluids with unbelievers, the unfortunate patriot expires before he can join the boys' choir. Next day the indignant politician leads the funeral procession past the hospital. Saray has sent extra cops to defend the hospital. The avengers march to the gate, set down the coffin, and beat a hasty retreat across the road. The cops do too, calling the bomb squad, but before they arrive the blast shatters the front of the hospital and the mob pours through the gate. Doctors and patients rush out the back, children in their arms, to meet a horde of One Trues waving machetes.

Somewhere in Heaven Fyodor looks on with a blissful smile, as he holds on with both hands to his resurrected penis.

• Homemaker

Zimara calls Avbury sometimes when she's worried, though neither of them say that. At first, they just use throw-away comms. Later they go through a labyrinth service. Avbury knows a lot of the women in Zimara's group, but doesn't know where they are.

"I got my kids back."

"I heard. The women here have been collecting toys and clothes for you and Arasely. How are they?"

"A little stunned, still, but I think they're beginning to trust me again."

"Trust you?"

"You know. That I won't go away, that there will be no more midnight rides."

"Is that the case?"

Zimara says, "They're outside now, building a house with sticks and plastic."

"Kids are so strong. Often they bounce back more quickly than adults. How about you? What's it like being a mom again?"

"I love it. I want more of it. I never asked, do you have kids?"

"I do, one in the States, one in Geneva. Adriana. I hope to see her at Christmas."

"When all this is over, I want to meet them. And I want you to meet Aloyzi and Gret."

"I'd like that."

"Right now we need a home. This is not good, how we live. We have to move all the time."

"As it happens, I've made some calls. I can get you to Germany, with Arasely and her kids. Might take a month or six weeks. Can you be safe for that time?"

"The other women?"

"Mostly no. The Germans, the Italians, the Brits— they send their warplanes here not to liberate you but to contain you. They don't want more refugees."

"They can't not know what is happening here."

"Of course they know. But their fascist parties gain votes in every election, campaigning against immigrants. The politicians who might care are afraid they'll lose their jobs. Three or four years, maybe the economy will smooth out, people won't be so afraid."

"So."

"You can leave the others behind. Think of your kids first."

"There are lots of kids."

"Then bring Gret and Aloyzi here for a bit. Until you find a home."

"I just got them back."

They both know the other options. After a moment, Avbury says it: "If you want a home in this country, you'll have to make one, or take one."

• Recalcitrant

Parallel discussions take place elsewhere. Take, for example, Kevrkendi, where the Zalman River topples off the plateau. There used to be a hydro power station there, until the Crusaders blew it up. Now they have press-ganged Kevrkendi's women to clear away the rubble. The women stand on the old walls, smashing them bit by bit with sledgehammers, and cart away the brick and stone with wheelbarrows. They are wrapped head to foot against the biting wind and sharp edges. Thus it's easy for Filipa and Katerin to join them. They have come at the request of some families in New Start Transition Settlement, who want to know if it's safe to go home.

"Who is that guy?" Katerin asks Sviyeta, whose sister is at New Start. Katerin knows of black men, of course, but has never seen one before.

"I don't know. He came with the bald guy. A servant?"

"Dresses pretty sharp for a servant."

Nagahry was furious when he heard Captain Rahday had destroyed the power station. He'd hoped to sell it to Clear Sparkling. They will need the power to divert Rudeny's waters to the thirsty nations on the Mediterranean. Fortunately for their plans, the dam is still intact. They have dispatched one of their top engineers, in the care of Mr. Totemish, to assess the damage.

"Stand over here," Katerin directs Sviyeta.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to take some photos, that's all, and I don't want them to see me."

"You have a comm?"

"Of course," she says proudly. "We all do." She gets several shots of the visitors.

"Don't let them see it."

Katerina picks at her sleeve, and the comm is gone.

Just then there's a shout, and the two look over to the far wall, where a woman wobbles with her sledgehammer three meters off the ground. More shouts, and workers nearby scramble away from the wall. For a moment Katerin can see the woman's face, gazing down with an expression of utter concentration. Then the wall slides into the ditch; she's on top for a moment, and then out of sight. The other women run to the settling heap and start digging, not frantically, but powerfully and with purpose.

The corporal in charge runs up, too. "Back to work!" he orders. The diggers don't stop. "Get back to work!" He's got a whistle around his neck, and he blows it, hard. Shovelsful of dirt and debris land at his feet. He tries to pull the women away but then half a dozen step between him and the diggers, shovels half raised.

The corporal summons his brave soldiers. "Nirbir! Korblaimi! Get over here!"

The other jihadists emerge from their spots by a trash fire, and the cab of the truck. They've been trying to keep warm. A couple are sipping chai from hotbotts. They saunter over to the corporal. Katerin counts seven.

Now the corporal is shouting at the women again. "Stop now!" He's got his handgun out. "Stop now or I shoot!" Some of the diggers are on their knees. They have freed the injured woman's head and torso and are scooping the rest away by hand.

"Still breathing," someone shouts. The women in front step toward the corporal, backing him up.

"Prepare to fire!" he tells his men, and waves his pistol wildly. Leisurely the others unsling their weapons. Katerin looks over to Filipa. Both grip the guns in their pockets. They can take out the corporal easy, but once the shooting starts, a lot of women will fall. Coming so soon after the ambush in Strelss, they are determined to sell themselves dear.

Mr. Totemish walks to the corporal and says something to him. The Crusader whips round, nearly hitting the black man with his gun. Spit flies from his mouth. Mr. Totemish raises a finger, lays it on the corporal's forearm, and very slowly presses down the gun.

"See that guy over there," he says, ticking his head at the visiting corporado. "He's working on a deal with the Archbishop. Could be worth, o, I don't know, a hundred million? That's Euros. A hundred million for the Crusade— for you and your mates. So think what you're doing. Waving guns around, that don't impress our man here."

"Bitches. Cunts," the corporal splutters.

"What are you going to do, shoot them all?"

The corporal glares, teeth set; clearly that is his intention.

Without taking his eyes off the madman, Totemish waves at the others to lower their weapons. "Look," he continues, "where's the nearest doctor?"

The corporal spews something unintelligible.

"Then at least let her family take this woman home." They've got her out now, laid on uneven ground. They spread a tarp and very gently lift her into it. She moans and flutters her eyes. Totemish summons the nearest soldier, tells him to bring around the pickup. As they drive the injured woman back to town, Bullet Head sidles up to Mr. Totemish.

"Unbelievable."

"Yeah, not really executive material, these boys." He looks up at the engineer. "Good thing for Clear Sparkling. Otherwise they wouldn't be so happy to sell you their country."

Once the pickup is out of sight, the other women go back to work without a word, and without much urgency, either. The other soldiers retreat to get out of the wind. The corporal stands there, gun in fist, glaring at his foreign guests until they go away.

Sviyeta says, "As you see, not the best time for Mihaela to come back. I don't know what it's like at New Start, but it's got to be better than this."

"You could join her there," Katerin suggests. "We can get your family out. After the war, you come back here."

"Right, and find a Crusader living in my house. So right away I got another war to fight."

"Then join the Women's Brigade. You hate these guys? So do we."

"And live like a bandit? Drag my kid from one crummy hideout to another." She tilts her chin at the steel sky. "And months of winter yet."

"The war won't last forever."

"And when it's over, whoever wins comes after you. Let's say someday the Dildos squirm back into whatever stinking carrion spawned them. You think the government wants a bunch of women running around with guns? You'll be next on the list." Sviyeta has thought about this. She stops shoveling and turns to the other. "Why don't you come here? All of you, just come to Kevrkendi, throw out these parasites."

"We've thought about it, believe me. Stay in one place. Make a real home, where they don't beat up women, everybody treats each other fair. Yeah, I'd like that. But they'd attack us for sure. And you."

"If you were with us, we'd fight. These are our homes. I know lots of women, and men, too. We'd fight these dirty bastards, if you were here."

"Who is that guy?" Lt. Djordjevich points to Totemish in the pictures Katerin sent. Kut zooms the screen to see better.

"Seen him once or twice before. Comes up on the databases, some kind of corporate troubleshooter. Takes on the ugly jobs."

"Odd context, some blowed-out power plant."

"It is. Run it by Interpol, see if they've got anything new."

Nope. Interpol has the Totemish name, several other aliases, a short list of suspected affiliations, and a photo taken from two blocks away, to which Katerina's best have been added; not much else. Bullet Head, however—

"Clear Sparkling!" Kut wonders. "What is the Godzilla of water corps doing in Rudeny?"

● Gret Won't Say Goodbye

Aloyzi has taken to the bandit life. He runs around like a deranged robot, bumping into walls and making shooting noises. When he hits Gret with a stick his mom slaps him hard, and takes away his supper. When Zimara gets ready to go back to Hidris, he begs to go with her.

"Are you going to shoot some Crusaders? Take me take me take me take me."

"I'm going to visit Yesenya. Maybe I can bring her home. Would you like that?"

Evidently so, judging by the joyous burst of machinegun noise that splutters from his lips. Zimara kisses his cheek, turns him around, and propels him in Damyana's direction.

"Here, 'Loyzi boy. Your mom will be back soon," Damyana assures him. She gets a firm grip on him and tells him to wave goodbye.

Out on the porch Aloyzi's sister is quieter, more anxious; clingy. She spends a lot of time with the other women, helping take care of their toddlers. She hates to see Zimara go, but won't say it. Zimara kisses Gret and squeezes her hard and steps off the porch. When Zimara looks back, it catches her throat to see the look of dread twisting the girl's face.

● Konsta Misses His Chance

Konsta and his buddies wander Redemption Street in Hidris, harassing shopowners— stealing, tagging, trashing. The businessmen are sick of it; already they pay too much to the Crusader officers, who nevertheless seem to make no effort to keep their troops in line. If all this merchandise were not stolen in the first place, it would be hard to make a profit.

This particular day Konsta keeps looking over his shoulder, or turning suddenly. Something odd, he can't quite catch it. Then he spots Zimara on a balcony over an alley. She has cupped her face in her hands, elbows on the railing, watching Konsta's gang bopping along. He stares at her to be sure. The scarf hides half her face, but he has seen that bold stare before. A bus rattles past, and when he can see the balcony again, Zimara has gone. Vyeko tugs him by the elbow.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing." That evening he's at the Nunnery when the truck brings the cleaning crew back from the Monastery. He pulls Yesenya aside.

"What do you think Goranka will do when she finds out you are meeting with a known atheist?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I know you're seeing Zimara. What are you up to, eh?"

"She's my cousin!"

"She is dangerous. I think Goranka ought to know about this."

"Please, you can't tell her. Konsta, don't you have a cousin?"

"Sure I do. I got plenty cousins."

"Where are they? I never see them."

"You don't want to see them. A little thing like you, they'd pinch your head like a platberry. You better pray you don't meet my cousins. My cousin Gorilla —they call him Gorilla— he killed sixteen men. He wouldn't think nothing of chopping you into pieces and feeding you to his dogs."

"Why do you talk so ugly?" Yesenya shakes loose.

"I'm a Crusader. What do you think we do all day, pray Hail Marys?"

"I don't want to be with you, Konsta. Just let me go. Zimara will pay you."

"You're my wife, and I order you to stay away from her."

"Goranka's my boss. You are just a boy."

"I'm a warrior for God."

Yesenya is curious. "Tell me, Konsta. When they tell you to do something, and you don't do it, do they hit you?"

"Of course. Everyone has to obey."

"You could run away. Why don't you run away?"

This is a question he dare not answer, because then he'd have to answer the next question: where would he go?

Goranka calls from the doorway. "Let's go, kiddo. Leave her alone, Konsta."

Konsta has no interest in tangling with Goranka. Seething, he heads back to the market, looking for Zimara. With Blago out of the way, he doesn't realize that she's still high on the Crusader target list. But he figures his new boss Byedny will be pleased if he brings her in. Or maybe he can finally do the deal with her for Yesenya's dowry. He doesn't find her, though.

Alone in the toilet, Yesenya scrolls through the pictures she has taken on the new comm Zimara gave her. A mimic, her cousin called it. All Yesenya managed to get is two blurry shots of Konsta storming off. She wants a clear take of his face. She is compiling a hit list of her own.

Yesenya's other task is to get images of her roomies at the Nunnery. Secretly, of course. It has occurred to Zimara that it would be a lot easier to bring out the Skylanders if some of the older women would help. Maybe she should spring the whole lot of them, and get away in the confusion. In the meantime, the Brigade can contact their families back in Rudeny, find out what leverage there might be.

● Babysitter

Zimara returns very late from Hidris. She throws her jacket on a chair. Damyana sits in a corner sewing earmuffs on a cap.

"What happened? I was worried."

"Let me clean up, Damyana. And sleep."

"I made some soup. I know you like snouts."

"Thanks, honestly, no. Let me save it for morning."

Damyana sets the cap aside and stands up. "I can make tea. You need something hot."

"No, no. Thanks so much for taking care of my kids."

"Aloyzi was a bit naughty, but Gret is a little doll. They're waiting for you in the back room. You should spend more time with your family."

Damyana has decorated the bedroom walls with icons and religious medals. Zimara finds Gret and Aloyzi on their knees by the cot.

"What are you doing?"

Stupid question. "We're praying to Jesus." Damyana stands in the doorway, looking on with satisfaction.

Makes Zimara angry, but she is not going to take it out on her children. She sits on the cot. "Come to me, my lights," she says, and enfolds them in her arms. "Tell me, what were you praying for?"

Gret steals a glance at Damyana. "For you and daddy and Yesenya and Damyana and all the Zimaras."

"I mean, what are you asking for?" Gret isn't sure.

"Tell you what. Think of something you really want. Have you got something?" Gret nods.

"What is it?"

"I want a machinegun," Aloyzi announces.

"I'm afraid Jesus gave all the machineguns to the Crusaders. How about an elephant? Would you like an elephant?" Aloyzi sucks on a finger as he considers the idea. Zimara looks at the girl.

Gret doesn't want to make Zimara angry. Softly, she says, "I want daddy to come stay with us."

Zimara embraces her. "All right, my love. You pray for that. Let Jesus bring us daddy." Zimara draws the blanket over her daughter and son, and kisses them both. On the way out she casts a poisonous glance at Damyana, who is suddenly busy in the kitchen, putting the dishes away. Zimara is too tired to argue. This is the sea they swim in. Her kids will have to figure it out.

In the following days, Damyana goes out of her way to be helpful. She is so contrite and humble, Zimara can't stay mad at her for long. Gret and Aloyzi seem to like her, and Zimara doesn't want to put them through another wrenching change. Also, she doesn't want to go through the hassle of finding someone to replace Damyana, and incur new obligations in the process.

Zimara likes to take her kids to Brigade meetings, figures they need to be around adult talk. She takes Damyana along to make sure they're occupied— so Damyana does get into the Council after all.

● Mission for the Archbishop

Next time Brother Michael reports to Nagahry, Judge Hokh waits until he leaves, then pounds on the Archbishop's door. He ignores Gloria and walks past her to the office. Nagahry has practically climbed into the satchel Michael left.

"Chupa!" The Archbishop looks surprised.

"Eddie!" Hokh pumps the Archbishop's left hand, since his right is tightly wrapped around— what? Jewelry? Coin? Hard to tell, since he's got it behind his back. The Judge walks to the desk and peers into the bag. "O my goodness!" He licks wrinkled lips and extracts a gold chalice, rimmed with rubies, or maybe colored glass.

"I didn't expect you till tomorrow." Nagahry slides a fistful into his capacious sleeve.

Hokh waves a hand. "Break in my schedule. Lucky." A silver candlestick catches his eye. "Exquisite. Brigadier Fischula will love this. He's got quite the collection, you know. And what's this?" He pulls out more goodies. "You don't mind, do you?" Nagahry steps back, out of the way of pumping elbows.

The Crusader rank and file have been told that the Kulkhiz government funds the Crusade, but there's a big flow the other way, too— not to the government but into the pockets of the Kulkhiz High Command, and of course their messenger's. Hokh is the collector. A sprightly seventy, he has had long service with predators even more ancient than himself. "Do you mind?" he says, holding up a

glistening tangle of jewelry before he drops it in a pocket. Commander Gloria had her eye on these; now she's looking daggers. Then there's all the cash. Hokh scatters riyals every time he pulls out a new treasure. Still rummaging through the bag, Hokh explains, "Sorry I missed Brother Michael. I rushed over as soon as I heard. You must keep me better informed." He looks up with a mock pout of disappointment. There is nothing fake about the Archbishop's expression.

"I was going to send these to you, of course," Nagahry grumbles.

"Glad to save you the trip." After he fills his pockets, Hokh replaces the larger items in the satchel and zips it up. He tugs on it, feeling the weight. "Perhaps the Commander can help me get this to the car." He casts his razor smile at Gloria till she rolls her eyes and hefts the satchel in two hands. "Don't look so stricken, Eddie. I brought something for you." From inside his jacket he takes out a slender gold clasp topped by a leaping gazelle in amber.

Nagahry turns it over in his palm. "Weirdly beautiful. What is it?"

"Take it, take it."

Gloria drops the satchel and grabs the clasp from Nagahry, slides it into her hair. "It's a hairpin, Eddie." She walks to the window, seeking her reflection.

"It's a hairpin," the Judge nods. "Fifth or sixth century, near as we can tell. Very valuable."

Nagahry doesn't see the point. "As you see, I have very little hair."

"We found it on a monk at the airport. He had a suitcase full of such trinkets. He was taking them to a dealer in Amsterdam."

"Odd business for a monk. I'll pray for him."

"This Brother Albert, he belongs to the community at Rudomil. You could ask the Abbot."

"I stay as far away as I can from that dried-up dotard."

"As a favor to the generals, then. Archbishop, Abbot— you understand. Our government would rather have the matter resolved in-house, as it were. Respect for the institution, like that."

"Let someone else poke the hornets nest. Ask him what, exactly?"

"Ask him about this lovely —precious!— artifact. Thing is, we think there's more."

When she comes back from fetching for the Judge, Gloria tells her lover, "You must go."

"Rudomil? That shithole." Nagahry spent his youth confined to the sacred precinct, exhausted by constant toil, groggy with lack of sleep, bored out of his skull with the endless drone of devotion. He shivers now to remember the freezing stone cells and corridors, the careless stink of old men, and never the sight of a woman. A kind of living mummification.

"Hokh said it: there's more. You must go," Gloria insists. She holds out the golden hairpin, turning it to catch a sunbeam.

● Free Market

Pavl laughs. "Volume discount! For that you need volume. Better talk to Grandmother." So Zimara goes once again to see Bryony. Bryony's gang has a sideline in the small arms trade, and good contacts for heavier weapons, when the Zimaras can afford them, which is not very often.

"You some kind of socialist?" the gangster accuses. "Don't come to me for handouts. My late husband was a free market warrior. He gave his life for the market. That's right, a martyr to capitalism. We hold it sacred."

Zimara has no idea what she's talking about.

"So when someone breaks a contract," Bryony continues, fist to her breast, "it offends me. It betrays our principles."

"I can see why," Zimara lies.

"Now, this Podgorny punk, he bought a couple truckloads from me last week. Told me they were going to Libya. Come to find out, he has made a deal with the Crusaders."

"You sell to the Crusaders yourself."
"Exactly. So where does this new kid get off, butting into my business?"
"The free market?" ventures Zimara.
Bryony narrows her eyes, scowls. "What are you talking about?"
"I hope he paid you well."
"Our usual bulk rate. So now he turns around and retails my merchandise to Rudomil."
"Disgusting."
"Repulsive."
"Hateful."
"Traitorous."
"Tell me, Grandmother. Where is this Podgorny now?"

A woman pounds on the rattling metal door of a warehouse, while a couple more stand to one side. After several minutes a fat guy pokes his head out. "Who are you?"

"I've got to see Podgorny," Emiliye wails. She looks like she's been crying.

"Get the hell out," he says, before Mandalika drops a loop over his head and yanks. The guy comes out of the doorway, twisting and turning violently, shaking Mandalika like a doll. Mandalika holds on grimly. A second man runs out.

"I've got a gun," Emiliye tells him, and points it at him shakily. The skinnier man rushes her and knocks it out of her hand.

Zimara, familiar by now with manly men, slaps an ax into his spine from behind. He drops like a broken puppet, eyes rolling wildly. He wonders what happened to him. His mouth works soundlessly, pumping blood not words.

Behind them the first guy has thrown Mandalika over his shoulder— not the best tactic, it turns out, for his situation. The wire slices through his throat and lodges at the hinge of his jaw. He whistles, pheet-bloop, pheet-bloop. Mandalika sits on the pavement, still tugging, and trying to catch her breath. Emiliye retrieves her pistol.

"Enough with this Hands up! shit," Zimara tells Emiliye.

Zimara takes a machine pistol from the whistler and slips inside the door, covering for the other two. They weave around vans and stacks of crates. Odd noises from the back. One guy sits in a folding chair, watching TV, while another fucks a woman on a tatty sleeping bag in the corner. It takes him a minute to register the woman's widening eyes, and the gun barrel pressing the back of his head. Lover boy slows down, frowning with concentration, and keeps pumping until he comes. Then he climbs off with a smirk of satisfaction. Emiliye doesn't appreciate the expression. As he turns his head she raps him in the mouth with her gun. Behind her, in front of Zimara, the TV watcher sprawls next to the overturned chair, right eye socket crumpled into his cheek. The woman on the sleeping bag stays utterly still.

"What's your name, dear?" Emiliye asks.
"Lalekshany," she says. She looks about eighteen years old.
"Put your clothes on."

The women like what they find— hand guns, machine guns, rocket launchers. Also boxes of medicine, pornography, and some fancy gear they think must be some kind of comm.

They don't know how to get so many weapons past the Crusader checkpoints. Instead, they bag them up and over the next two weeks disperse them among women they know in several villages. This way they don't have to carry when they cross the front lines. Later on, they'll have enough money to do it the easy way: bribe the checkpoint commanders.

They take Lalekshany back to government territory, and point her toward the refugee center.
"Let me stay with you."

"They can help you at the camp."

"I can help *you,"* she insists. "Take me with you." So they do.

Podgorny's gang are not the only smugglers Lalekshany knows. She supplements and verifies the information they get from Bryony. Turns out, though, she is a terrible liar and gossip, a bold if novice fabulist. She tells outrageous stories about the people she doesn't like, and about the people she does. At first she amuses the older women; then they get angry. When they're planning an operation they have to be able to trust the information she gives them. She reforms at last only because they threaten to send her away.

● Dance Don't Touch

Kut calls the next day. "I found a place for you to meet," he reports. "No one will bother you."

Zimara warns, "You understand, not all of us will be there. Be a mistake for someone to betray us."

"Who would you send? Mandalika? I have come to admire her work." The Captain wants Zimara to know he has been paying attention.

She boasts, "I know a lot of women who don't fear Crusader killers, never mind some captain with the PoPo."

"You better fear the Crusaders. So far you have been cruising under the radar. What happens when they figure out what you're doing?"

"We take the next step."

"Hence this big meeting. OK, I get it. Well, I've got a place for you if you want. An old school. It's empty. Nothing nearby but the rail yards. Got a kitchen and running water. I can call to have the lights turned on."

"Line of sight?"

"Yeah, yeah, you can see all around. Outbuildings for watchers. Couple ways in and out." Shifting gears, the Captain continues, "You know, the government has a program to assist local militias against the Dildos."

"O, you're going to help us."

"Not me. Not my program. I'm just telling you. Could be food, fuel, vehicles; weapons under certain circumstances."

"And why should the government help?"

"First of all, because you are a thorn in our side. We've got terrorists and smugglers to keep track of, and now we hear about crazy women sneaking back and forth across the lines, and leaving bodies across the plateau. The politicians don't like it."

"Tell them to do their jobs, and we can all go home."

"The second reason is that we have the same enemies."

Zimara remembers Emiliye's question at Manomekhlis. "And this program, what does it cost?"

"No cost. It's assistance."

Zimara says nothing. The captain can hear her impatience. He sighs. "There are certain requirements. The group has to be vetted by my department. We have to see the member lists. The group would have to report what it does with any materials we send."

"Right. No thanks."

"The member lists thing is stupid. Who would agree to that? Of course, we would have no way of knowing if it were just a bunch of aliases. Zimara, for example, you could become General Zlatka. How about that?"

"I'm afraid then I wouldn't be allowed to talk with mere police captains."

"Don't think I don't have my own career plans."

"Field Marshall."

"Not at all. How does Grand Admiral sound to you?"

"I feel weak in the knees."

"This program, this assistance: the big hurdle is, the group has to be established in a community. That's the point, to help people defend themselves against terrorists."

"Since your government has failed so miserably."

Kut replies with some heat: "There were people here fighting these killers while you were still milking the goats, or whatever people do in Echmash. You have no idea how many brave and smart people were killed before the elections and in the first months of the war. So you want to call it a weak government, you are absolutely right. It was born crippled. And yet we hobble along, clearing and building and trying to put out these raging fires."

"Have a care, my Captain. A person might suspect you of commitment. They could take advantage."

Kut hates to be scrutinized— a common sentiment among nosy parkers. "I'm trying to be practical. I heard about Strelss. Maybe you cleaned up that mess. But you fucked up in the first place. You need some training."

"By the likes of you? We know how to help women. You don't."

"I'm telling you, if you mean to keep defying the Crusade, you need training. They have been killing a long time. You are still in kindergarten."

"That's what I like about this business: anyone can join. Point and pull the trigger. You think these sad little boys are smarter than my women?"

"Smart is not being too proud to ask for what you need. You don't trust the government, I can put you in touch with people at NATO."

"I don't trust any of you."

"Trust is over-rated. So what'll it be? You want a place to meet or not?"

• Sing-Along

The Crusaders have bulldozed a wide gravel road leading to the monastery, torn down part of the wall, and rebuilt East Gate to allow in big trucks and APCs. A cobbled terrace extends just inside the gate, where three hundred monks used to celebrate the holy days. Today is another special occasion, but the monks have chosen not to attend.

Instead, just past dawn troops and women line up before the Abbot's palace for choir practice. Yesenya's there, too. Doctor Sevik leads them in that old favorite, *Fiery Sword:*

The steelclad arm of the Lord / Strikes with fiery sword.

A handful of old men on the steps accompanies them with flutes and strings. Everyone knows this tune from the video played wherever Crusaders gather. Then they try the inspirational ballad, *Roast the Traitors in the Fires of Hell,* about the famous last stand of Rudeny knights against invading infidels— one set or another, at this point no one can remember which. They expect the Abbot to pop out at any moment, to bless their mighty if unpracticed efforts.

The sun perches on tiptoe atop Rudomil's east wall. Sevik checks his comm, taps his foot. More hymns. Sevik throws down his baton and walks away as it clatters down the steps. Some of the boys snap-slide a roll of display fabric, so the faithful can watch videos of raids and bombardments while they wait. Towards mid-morning Brother Michael rides in on a motorbike; stops before the Abbotry, takes off the sleek bullet helmet —matte black to match his body suit— looks around, puts it on again and roars away. The Crusaders droop and fidget. They missed breakfast. The girls and women arrange themselves on the ground, fanning their faces or braiding each other's hair.

At length they hear gunshots and honking. The women stand, the troops in the courtyard snap to attention. Sevik hurries in again with several commanders, and rushes up the steps. The Archbishop

arrives with his entourage, four long Luhosos in forest camo, with flags and golden crucifixes affixed to the corners of the windshields, drivers leaning on their horns while passengers blast the inoffensive sky with automatic weapons. (The falling shot drops a couple passersby in Hidris town, just outside the sacred precinct.) The visitors peel round and round in the courtyard, spewing dust and pebbles on the patient crowd. The old guys on the steps strike up a tune. Their ancient lungs heave like cracked leather bellows, but no one can hear them over the mechanized uproar.

Nagahry, resplendent in shiny boots and creased camo, steps out of the lead car and ascends the stairs to the Abbot's door, p.a. in hand. Doctor Sevik hurries back to greet him. The Archbishop blesses the crowd. A great honor, this visit by the holy man; normally he prefers the sunny seaside Kulkhizan capital to this grimy mountain town. But now it's his turn to wait. He is expecting someone. He stands there in the sun with Doctor Sevik and the other officers.

Eventually they confer, heads inclined, hands over their mouths. Sevik retrieves his baton, and raises it once more. Again the singers belt out *Fiery Sword*. Twice, thrice, while messengers disappear, one by one, inside the Abbot's palace, and don't come out. Sevik looks grim. He turns around and crashes his boot against the massive iron-bound portal, which barely budges, and Sevik has to step back gingerly, face rigid, pretending it doesn't hurt. Nevertheless, with lots of tugging the door swings slowly open, and Sevik waves in the Archbishop, and follows him, limping a tiny bit. Sevik's officers huddle on the steps for a moment. Then they dismiss the crowd. Go home. No matter: The results will be just as planned, with fewer flowery flourishes.

After Yesenya describes the scene to Zimara, Zimara checks in with Captain Kut, and then forwards some images to her cousin. Yesenya recognizes Nagahry, Brother Michael, and a few of the other commanders.

"Who's the boss?" Zimara asks.

"Goranka."

"I mean, of the Crusaders, who's the boss?"

"Brother Michael. Everyone does what he says."

"Not the Archbishop?"

"He's new. I didn't see him before. I think he's rich."

"Rich?"

"He's got all these rings, and gold clothes, and he smiles all the time." Yesenya pauses when she gets to Sevik. "I've seen this one before. Who is he?"

Zimara is watching remotely. "He's the spy. The spy boss."

Zimara doesn't see her cousin wrinkle her nose. "He's weird. He tells the monks how to sing, but I like it better the way they do it."

"Do you know where he stays?"

"That one has an office in the tower near the oratory. I can see it from . . . ." Yesenya closes her mouth; she's not supposed to talk about Sky Land.

"From where?"

Yesenya changes the subject. "Brother Michael doesn't stay here, but he comes every day. I don't know where they put the Archbishop. Do you want me to ask around?"

"Eyes open, mouth shut. I want you to be safe, my light." Yesenya shrugs. Girls are invisible.

● Gangster Delight

Bryony claps with delight when she hears about the warehouse raid, scattering tobacco ash across the desk. "I like these women!" What she likes is this new method of getting rid of competitors, cheap.

Pavl rolls his eyes. "Crazy people. Give me gangsters any time."

It occurs to Bryony that Podgorny is not the only person who deserves to go on to that golden bazaar in the sky. She hangs the cigarette on her lip and, squinting against the smoke, bends over to retrieve a box from a drawer. She checks inside and drops it rattling on top of the desk.

"What's this? Trackers?" Pavl holds the tiny devices up to the light.

"That pest Skender Hrnchich."

"Right."

"Are we still bidding for the flowers?" she asks. Pavl nods. "So, meet him but don't buy. See what you can do with these."

Pavl drops a fistful of trackers in his jacket pocket. "OK."

"And the Manucharian brothers."

"A bit trickier."

"Let the Zimaras do the hard work. We just point them in the right direction. We're like, what do you call it, mentors. We want to keep our girls in practice."

"You know," he says, "they keep getting guns for free, you're losing money."

Bryony takes a long drag off the cigarette. "Right now they have no money. They do a few jobs like this, they'll be rich. They'll want quality. Then they'll come back to me." She taps her temple with two maroon-tipped fingers. "In this business, you got to look ahead."

Over time Bryony's betrayals ripple out. The smuggler gangs begin to realize someone is shopping them. Unable even to imagine the Brigade, they have to suspect each other. Misunderstandings turn into shootouts. More guns fired, fewer sold. Even Bryony can't prosper in such chaos, and she cuts back her sly tips to the Zimaras. By then, though, they have their own sources of information, and of guns, too.

● Early Retirement

The monks hate Sevik, but they clear out of his way. He and the Archbishop barge into the Abbot's study.

"Blessed Morning, Your Grace," the Archbishop starts. "Terribly sorry to disturb you. I know you must be busy, because otherwise you would have met us on the steps."

Abbot Snat subscribes to the Hogwarts style of abbotry, and cultivates the ancient grizzled look, complete with braided beard and ear hair. He turns the page in his worn Observance and looks up through wire-rim specs.

"Nevertheless," Nagahry continues, "this is important, and I knew you'd want to know."

The Abbot waits with a look of distaste.

"First let me speak of my joy in seeing you again after so many years. It feels like I've come home."

"A crime, your Grace. We have to report a serious crime," Sevik butts in.

"The only crime here is the desecration of this holy place," the Abbot opines. He looks to his book and turns another page.

The Archbishop blandly resumes: "Something a bit less spiritual, your Grace. Seems one of the younger brothers was stopped at the airport last week, backpack full of priceless antiquities."

"You have Albert? Where is he?"

"O my, no. He's a citizen of Kulkhiz, no? We have no jurisdiction here." Uninvited, Nagahry takes one of the chairs before Snat's desk. Doctor Sevik keeps standing, hands clasped in back, swaying impatiently. "I see you miss him," Nagahry observes.

“We’ll investigate this purported offense,” the Abbot replies. “In the meantime, we require him here. You can tell Judge Hokh I’ll have a brother in Djemdjad tomorrow to fetch Albert home. O yes,” he adds, “I know all about your Judge Hokh.”

“Not that kind of offense, Grace,” Sevik explains. “Theft of the national patrimony . . . I doubt the Kulkhiz courts are going to leave it to church discipline.”

“Especially as there may be other monks involved,” says Nagahry.

“Albert doesn’t know anything,” the Abbot insists.

Nagahry inclines his head to one side. “He named the dealer in Amsterdam. Seems this is not the first transaction. And he could remember most of the pieces he has sold over the years, with quite remarkable detail.” Nagahry looks up at Sevik. “Sometimes, I hear, organizers of crimes pick simpletons to do the riskiest work. Keeps the organizers at arm’s length, you see. But in their arrogance, they may underestimate their own subordinates.” To the Abbot: “The Kulkhizans are poring through museum catalogs now, trying to match recent acquisitions with the list Albert gave us.”

“What do you want?” the Abbot asks, as if he’s bored with this conversation already.

“You know, they say these pieces are remarkable, the ones your man was carrying. Very special. Not just gold from your altars. Albert called it the Hoard of the Khazars— part of the Hoard.”

“That poor boy. There is no such thing. All that was destroyed when the Mongols burned Serenopol.”

Nagahry shrugs. "The specialists disagree. Do you think we're stupid? When we showed them these pieces, the professors were very excited." Well, one professor. No advantage in blabbing to the world."

“What do you want?” the Abbot repeats.

“Such a little thing.”

"Bring me the boy. He is nothing to you.”

“Alas,” Sevik points out, “Brother Albert fell ill.”

“The doctor here did all he could . . . .” Sorrowfully Nagahry touches the crucifix to his lips. Doctor Sevik’s specialties, of course, are medieval music and interrogation.

For a moment the abbot’s face looks like an old apple stored in the basement over the winter. "God will damn you for harming the innocent."

“A favorite, Brother?” The Archbishop leans forward. “Your tears disgust me, you old faggot.”

The Abbot stiffens immediately. A terrible resolve darkens his face like a thundercloud. “You tried to take my community from me once before, and failed. I have friends, too.”

Nagahry fears these fearless, ignorant, joyless old men. For thirty years they kept him from his destiny. He had to sweep their paths, clean their messes, kiss the hems of their sleeves. Only with the One True insurgency has the Archbishop emerged at last into the sun. He'd like to smash the old men, grind them into dust.

They also taught him patience. A little longer, Nagahry tells himself.

Silkily, he replies, “A great mistake on my part. I suffer from pride, and I beg God’s forgiveness. Keep your community. No, I want only a little donation, something to sustain our brave Crusaders until next campaign season.” Once the campaign resumes, the Crusade can fund itself from looting.

"You know we have no money."

"You have the Hoard of the Khazars. Surely you can spare a bit, just a little bit, to help our holy cause."

"Your thugs have looked everywhere. They didn't find it, and won't, because it's a myth."

"You know, you are well rid of that little monk, pretty as he was. Because he also named the rest of his gang. No doubt, if it comes to an investigation, many others will talk as well. It will be a great scandal." Nagahry crosses his legs and leans back. “Tell me, do you have a regular item in the Rudomil budget: ‘Sales from stolen antiquities’?”

"If there were any trafficking as you describe, it would go to support our work. God's work.”

"I'm sure the world will understand. What worries me, though, is how our own Crusaders will see it. We are in a war for the soul of a nation. The devil has his icy hand on our throats. I would hate for these young men who sacrifice so much to think that the Abbot is denying them aid in the hour of crisis, for the sake of his own comfort."

The Abbot looks as if he's ready to come across the desk. Nagahry watches with grim amusement, knowing that the old man dare not. The Archbishop continues in a soothing tone, "We require only a little, Your Grace. Just enough to feed and equip our brave boys. I'll let you choose the pieces, whichever you want. Call it a loan."

But of course, as soon as the Abbot delivers a few pieces, the Crusaders learn where the monks have stashed the rest. For near a thousand years the loot of the Khazar empire has been packed into long-forgotten caves beneath the monastery. Now the Crusaders have it, and no longer need the Abbot. Within weeks Snat too falls ill, and one night finds himself in a convoy speeding to the coast, and the military hospital offshore. A new Abbot, the Archbishop's man, hosts a special prayer vigil for his predecessor, then grimly lists the monks who dare attend.

● Vengeance is Hers

The Zimaras harbor a lot of bitterness about the murder of Berenika, and the threat to Miryam. Makes them more fearful, too, and trigger-happy.

Cresida's aunt Lilyana spent time at New Start camp, got desperately homesick and returned to her village, much against Cresida's advice. She went to live with her brother, who had always abused the women in his household. Cresida promises to check on her aunt, but by the time she gets there a few weeks later, Lilyana is already dead and buried. Accident with the tractor, they tell her. The brother's wife won't say anything more. Cresida takes Lilyana's sweating, swearing brother out to the woods at gunpoint and leaves him there, spilling.

When Arasely finds out she brings Cresida to the Council.

"He did it! I know he did!" Cresida protests.

"How do you know that?"

"He hit women. He wanted to grab that little bit of pasture Lilyana owned. He was an asshole."

"You are probably right," Zimara replies. "But you don't know. Did you ask around for witnesses?"

"Sure. I should have gone around to all the relatives. Get my head blown off."

"Listen carefully. We cannot go around shooting guys on suspicion. We may need men to help us someday. We'll never get that if they think we plan to kill them all."

Reluctantly, the group leaders agree with Zimara's reasoning, but they won't punish Cresida. Instead, they issue a statement about the new policy: unless they're under fire, Brigade members may not shoot people without an investigation and permission from the Council. Of course, "under fire" can be flexibly interpreted. To avert further vengeance killings, Arasely and Zimara see that they will have to do more to get their members on board with the new policy.

Zimara calls Kut. "You mentioned training. What are we talking about?"

● Art Appreciation

When the Byzantines still held Ullaq pass, a handful of anchorites lived in a bubblework of limestone caverns in the mountainside. Their successors built the Sankt Rudomil monastery over the old entrance, and over centuries forgot about the caves. But the abbots have always known about them. When the last of the Khazar princes fled there with the imperial treasury —borne by a thousand camels, according

to the old chronicles, notoriously unreliable— Lord-Abbot Denko let the prince stash it all in the caves. Then he had the prince strangled in his sleep, and tossed the body down the side of the mountain. The Khazar rulers were Jews; that one should dare enter Sankt Rudo's resting place was like spitting in the face of God.

Sevik hurries to bring the news to Brother Michael.

"He did it. Nagahry got the Abbot to tell us where they've cached the treasure."

"So it's true."

"I've seen it. Parts of it. The top layer."

"Layers!"

"Piles. Heaped up like snowdrifts against a cavern wall, so deep I shouldn't wonder if the pieces at the bottom have been crushed. Ceremonial axheads, rhytons of silver and ivory, jeweled torcs, gold fittings for chariots, magnificent! It will take us months to catalog. You must see."

"And they've kept these hidden for centuries."

"Longer. Selling a piece now and then, to repair a wall or add a new chapel."

Michael cocks thumb and forefinger like a pistol, and jerks it up twice. "These old men and their secrets. I'm a little surprised the Abbot gave in so easily."

"Not easily. Nagahry had to twist a bit."

"A twisty man, our Archbishop."

"Handle with care."

"So: how much?"

"No telling," Sevik says. "We'll have to get professionals to take a look. Could take weeks to inventory. I think you won't be disappointed."

"I don't want a gang. Find one person. And make sure you keep your fist on his throat."

"That's what Nagahry said, too."

Sevik's partnership with Brother Michael goes back a ways, to the peak years of agitation by the democratic movement. Sevik was in jail then, charged with murdering student activists, and a couple professors to boot.

At the time, Major Modrek, just then becoming Brother Michael, ran General Bort's plans section. When Modrek heard about Sevik's case, he brought it to his boss. How unjust to punish such a patriot! Bort arrested the judge, and the replacement simply dismissed all the old judge's cases. No need for threatening phone calls; good servants anticipate their masters.

Michael had begun building the Brotherhood of Cross and Sword, and he needed a good ideologist—preferably one who could read and write. So he put Sevik in charge of the Brotherhood's online operation Purify. When he realized the extent of Sevik's spy network, the major found him other work to do.

Naturally, Nagahry knows of Sevik's ties to Brother Michael. But he sees the Doctor's burning ambition. He knows what a jerk the Brother is. Nagahry figures it's only a matter of time until they have a falling out.

● Where We Go from Here

Zimara finds Avbury in the passenger seat of a truck parked on a back road near Saray. The bandit climbs in on the driver's side. Avbury pulls on a cigarette and hangs it out the window.

"Got most of what you want," says Avbury. "Some I couldn't bring. Don't have enough ourselves."

"Thank you. You know how much this will help. Oh, by the way," Zimara hands her another list. "For next time. Whatever you can find for us." Avbury shakes her head, mildly exasperated, and folds

the paper into her jacket. Zimara says, "I'm suprised you came yourself. Happy, and surprised. You could have sent someone."

The Doctor shrugs. "Don't need to put my staff at risk. Also, I don't want anyone but me stealing from my shop."

"We could have asked Rekady."

Avbury takes a last hit, tosses the butt. "I wanted to see you."

Zimara nods. "Sure. I'm glad. I was going to call. As you see, I am completely healthy. And safer than most women out there." She gestures at the world beyond the windshield. “Speaking of which, how is Rosika?”

“Walking. Well, hobbling. I want to keep her a few weeks more.”

“She wants to come back with us?”

“Losing Berenika hit her hard. ‘I don’t want to lose them all,’ she said, meaning you and the Brigade. She feels she belongs with you.”

“She does.”

Peering into the dark, Avbury admits, “Makes me a little nervous to be here.”

Zimara has never seen the Doctor nervous, and scans her face. “You’re doing something new,” she says with some surprise.

“You’d think at my age . . . .”

“I’ve still got your little pistol. I should give it back.”

“No, no. A donation to the cause.”

“All this is new to me, too. I think we're all right for a few minutes. There are women in the car there and some you can't see.”

“Is that Arasely?”

"It is." Zimara hits the lights a couple times. A few meters ahead an arm snakes out a car window, waving. Avbury waves back. "I asked her if she wanted to sit with us. She said it would be good for me spend a few minutes with you alone. She knows me better than I do."

“Yes, the conference. How did it go?”

“Well, I think. Big questions about what to do next. I think we’re mostly agreed, but there were hard discussions.”

What the Brigade wants to do is far outside Avbury's experience, but she does know a thing or two about building organizations. So she has a lot of questions, some of which Zimara has not considered. Zimara can answer the important ones, though.

"Tell me, do the others understand what you're trying to do?"

"I think so— as far as I know myself. We all want it. They are talking to the women in the villages and sometimes the men, explaining our purpose, sometimes better than I can."

Avbury digs around in her pockets, comes up with a flyer from the Women's Collective.

"Right," Zimara says. "I had no hand in that. Emiliye and a couple others wrote it and they are passing it around. I'm proud of them." She pushes on the wheel, shifts to get more comfortable. "Another way I know is that they challenge me all the time. More than I like. If they don't understand something, they make me explain, and they let me know if they don't buy it. Sometimes not in words."

"I know how that goes," Avbury observes. "You got a big job. Sounds like you’ve made some big mistakes. Also that you recognize them, and are figuring out how to fix them."

"We do. All of us. It's hard to tell for sure, but the group leaders tell me a lot of times the women will report their own mistakes."

Avbury holds out the cigarettes. Zimara holds up a hand. "Go ahead." Avbury lights another.

“Are you going back to Echmash?”

“I hope so. We haven’t decided where. But you were right, it’s time to make a home.”

“I know it’s a big step.”

“Risky. We’ll be a big target. And we’ll be responsible for other people, too. If we can’t protect them . . . . Some feel we are doing OK now, why change?”

“The problem is, you can rescue this family or that, you can help them escape, but you’re not really changing the country. The murders keep going on.”

“And we can’t build something better if we’re hiding in the hills.” Zimara nods. “I didn’t know you thought about this.”

“Occupational hazard. It’s exactly the limitation with refugee work. We can save lives, sometimes thousands, but we can’t help many tens of thousands more. War is always much bigger than what little help we can give.”

“I didn’t think how frustrating your job must be.”

“Why should you?’

With a smile: “I figured you were interested in our work because you like us.”

“That too. But you must know by now, when we admire someone, it’s mainly for the way they illuminate possibilities. They help us see ourselves in new ways.” Prodding a little, Avbury says, “And that inspiring person, even when we love them, we don’t always really see them.”

Zimara knows what she’s getting at, but since the conversation with Berenika’s parents, she has come to terms with it. “I, too, am sometimes dazzled by the Zimara we’ve invented. She gets in the way sometimes.” She shrugs. “It’s a small cost compared to the rest. My kids see me. I’m very lucky.”

“I’m glad.”

“We are counting on your help, you know. Once we settle into a community, we’re going to have to grow fast, just to defend it.”

“Once you settle in, you’ll find many more people willing to help.”

“That’s what Kut said, too.”

“There you go. Me and the Political Police, singing in unison.” Avbury keeps silent for a minute. "Another question. What will happen to the Brigade if something happens to you?"

“I think about that too sometimes.” Zimara considers. “Mandalika is as brave as a lion, and Arasely will hold the women together. As we get more experience, the other women are taking more responsibility. We’ve stepped up the training program.

“It’s not a simple process.” She grins. “But you know, I think it will be OK." Zimara tells Avbury about the recurring dream she has— walking atop a high wall toward some unknown but welcome destiny. It’s a little dangerous, but exhilirating. “I think they can’t kill me right now. Maybe later. Right now we have too much to do. So I’m not worried.” She squeezes Avbury’s hand. “Blago tried to kill me twice, right?”

“He didn’t know what he was up against.” They sit companionably for a minute. Finally, Avbury tells her, ”There’s no one more capable of doing this than you. And you are right to trust the others.” The doctor pulls the handle on the door. "I need the truck back."

"Four days," Zimara promises. After that, she and Avbury talk many times by comm, but it will be months till they see each other again, one more time.

● Spies

“A spy?”

“My cousin says so. The boss of all the spies.” Yesenya and Nika lean on the parapet of the roof of the ruined church. They are looking across to Sevik’s office in the Tower of Penance. They have been wondering about this guy since he stopped them that day in the courtyard.

Nika peers through a tube made of toilet paper rolls. “He’s shaking. I think he’s dying.”

“No, he’s got headphones on,” Yesenya points out. “He’s just listening to music.”

Doctor Sevik is especially twitchy today due to his new research project. He is compiling notes on the sex perversions of Western women. It's only fair for his innocent warriors to know what they're up against. He hopes to finish in time for the next On Your Knees World Congress. He's got a title in mind already: "Hell on Earth".

Over the next few days, Nika makes a point of checking Sevik with her telescope, but she can't make out what's on his screen. Now and then he looks up and appears to be talking to someone, but Nika can't see far enough into the office. She can see men entering Sevik's tower from the courtyard, but they are too far away to identify, even through toilet paper rolls. Nika gets bored.

Vlasta has been looking over Nika's shoulder. She turns to Yesenya. "What about that comm your cousin gave you? Do you have it with you?"

She does. As they know from the kite images, the comm has a terrific zoom feature. They can see Sevik's visitors clearly. And when Zimara relays the photos to Kut's office, they create quite a stir.

● Council Chooses Meeyadz

Today the Brigade Council meets in a barn at the edge of a clearing in the mountains. They pay the farmer in stolen petrol; also, he's afraid of them. Once when they met they were betrayed by a villager, and there was a firefight, and the Council barely escaped; one woman died. Since then they take care not to assemble all in one place. That way, if there's an attack, there will always be someone to carry on the work; and not incidentally, see to any informants. So today Daneetsa is out with her unit looking to steal a couple trucks. Filipa has an appointment with Captain Kut, to negotiate secrets and weapons. The rest meet here, in the barn, drinking tea against the cold.

Zimara and Arasely want to go back in force and take their home village, Echmash. It's been on their minds for a long time. They will chase away the Crusaders and the big landowners they protect, restore stolen land, establish property rights for women, set up a divorce court, and shoot rapists. Zimara paints a wonderful picture. It will be a new reign of justice.

Others are not so sure. "If we settle on the plateau, we'll be easy targets for the Crusaders."

Damyana says, "What's wrong with what we're doing now? It's not so bad, yeah? We help a lot of people. The war will end. Then we can go home."

Arasely says, "We have brought a lot of families together. But think about it. Most of them are still at New Start. All we're doing is making more refugees."

"People have been asking us to settle in with them, help them kick out the Crusade." Katerin says. "Lots of places there are only a few Dildos, terrorizing everyone else."

Lemane butts in. "I want to help. But Echmash is too dangerous. It's too big, and it's near the main road. The Crusaders will fight hard for it."

"We know how to fight," Zimara says.

Tamar snorts. "Against armored cars? With what? You know better."

"The women of Echmash will stand with us."

"Maybe. Eventually. But we haven't enough weapons for ourselves now. It's a bad idea."

Cresida remembers, "Avbury said that if a village wants to set up a local defense force, the government will send guns."

"Avbury. What does she know?"

Mandalika says, "I heard that, too. But it all takes time. Will the Crusaders leave us be for three months or six months? We don't know. We have to be ready. If we go in before we're ready, we'll just bring hell to the community."

As always, Zimara is impatient. "I've waited a long time."

"None of us wants to wait," Tamar snaps. "We all have homes and families."

“We can’t afford a defeat,” Cresida cautions. “All that good will we’ve built up with people, that could blow away overnight.”

In the end, the women agree that they need a home base. But Echmash is too exposed. Mandalika sums it up. “Arasely, Zimara, we understand that you want to go home. And we can help you. But not just now. We have to get stronger. Can you wait?”

Nisibis, a shy woman, mentions Meeyadz, a hamlet high in the mountains, where she grew up. “We’re poor and very hard to reach. No one cares about Meeyadz. We have a church, but no priest. We have good water and a lot of sheep. A little smuggling over the border. The mayor and his bodyguard collect taxes for the Crusaders, but they are five or six, that’s all. They steal too much, no one likes them.”

“’No one’ is a big claim,” says Arasely.

“OK,” Nisibis replies. “I mean my whole family (that’s four households), my neighbors on Broken Face (seven households), the Shepherds’ Solidarity, the Holy Mary prayer group . . . . “

Arasely holds up a hand. “I believe you. Just checking.”

“When did you go there last?”

“Late summer. Poscheel and I, and Daneetsa. We got Daneetsa’s kids. We’ve been there four times. We know the women.”

“They know you.”

“Yes. They help.”

“I know that place," Lemane pipes up. "A gravel track, up and up. When it’s wet, you have to walk—and it’s always wet.”

“Can we get food and guns up there?”

“On our backs. But that's good. Crusaders don't like to walk.”

Zimara walks the hills that evening with a backpack and earphones. She listens to Haleesa Sladek Seerchay’s sentimental, occasionally shrewd love songs, and thinks through what she must do.

● Rude Awakening

So sixteen women trek up to Meeyadz just after first snow. They are wet and cold when they get there. The mayor is so surprised he doesn't think to raise his hands, or a gun. The women have to wake up the mayor's thuggish cops to arrest them, and lock all three in a shed behind the church, amid candle stands and broken statuary.

The villagers can't believe it. They show up in the village square, as commanded, so Mandalika can check their names against the village rolls. They stay all day, as the women of the Brigade search the houses for guns. No doubt there are more stashed away in the hills; those will take longer to ferret out. They bring the guns back to the mayor's office, and give receipts to the families, and ask the men to sign. The main idea is to encourage them to keep any hidden weapons hidden, a little out of reach, and too scattered to outgun the Brigade.

There are almost as many men here as women, a good sign— the war has barely touched this place. But dangerous, too; the Brigade have no idea how the men will react. They'll have to trust the women to report any conspiracies.

"The mayor is a little thief for the big thieves, the Crusaders,” Zimara announces. “So we don't recognize his government. Instead, you will choose your own leaders." But no one steps forward, not even the women Nisibis knows. So Zimara sends them all home, and the Brigade start armoring the tiny police station, and the mayor's house at the other end of the village. They set up watch positions on the track and on the slopes just above the village, so they can track movements in or out. Then they build a shelter for the women guarding the captives behind the church; this time 3 village women come to help.

Arasely sends "talk teams" to visit each household, to explain what the Brigade is up to. It takes them weeks, and they also visit farmsteads on the mountainside. As near as they can tell, four men took off that first night. But most people have stayed. Where would they go? Nisibis asks her friends in the village to form a committee to take care of the families whose men have left.

Zimara sets up an office on the first floor of Nisibis' house. Soon there's a line at the door every morning, villagers needing help or looking to complain.

• Consultant

Centuries ago the monks built a network of rain-fed cement-sealed cisterns beneath Rudomil monastery. They have been dry since the monks drilled deep wells into the mountain. Now Sevik has cordoned off several corridors and chambers and bit by bit has been crowding them with ancient treasures from caves still further below. The place can be reached by passages beneath the old scriptorium.

Professor Kvek arrives from Djemdjad to evaluate the collection. The old guy wanders dazedly amidst the golden helmets, jade armlets, ritual vessels, gifts made for kings. He has never seen anything so glorious. "It's true! The Hoard of the Khazars!"

Sevik sets him straight. "Don't be a slave. There's no such thing. Clearly, these are the works of Rudeny Empire. Look at them! Do you think barbarian nomads could have devised these wonders? Leave the archaeology to me."

Kvek throws up his hands in alarm. "You are right of course, Doctor."

Sevik's annoyance does not dissipate so easily. He grabs the back of the professor's neck. "No one asked you your opinion. I brought you here to make an inventory, with prices. Set them high! How much can we get on the world market? Stick to your job."

The professor works like crazy for a week, and reports back to Sevik. "OK, I've got a count, and I know what to look at first. I need to get back to Djemdjad for a few days, and I'll start again here next week."

"You don't like the guest room? I can find you a better one."

"No, no. I just want to get a change of clothes, spend a few nights in my own house, know what I mean?"

"We need you here."

"I need my books, and I want to consult my colleagues. This is an enormous find."

"We'll send for the books. You can't talk to anyone."

"This inventory, it could take many weeks."

"No doubt you'll want to hurry," Sevik says.

• Lottery

A break in the weather, and Zimara calls the people of Meeyadz back to the square. She stands on the steps of the mayor's office. She tells them to take turns picking squares of paper out of a hat, and return to their place in the crowd. The women get green squares, the men yellow.

"The squares have numbers on them," Zimara explains. "Whoever has yellow numbers one through six will become the new village councillors. Whoever has green numbers one through six will also join the council. So check your numbers."

At once there is a great to-do in the crowd, a shuffling and muttering and fluttering of hands. The Zimaras notice that some of the men and women push hurriedly toward others, and furtive hand-offs. As the Zimaras have anticipated, the most fearful nominees have exchanged their cards with people

more willing to take the job. Which might mean the village gets the same old leadership; that could cause problems later on. At least there has been an informal kind of election.

"All right," Zimara commands. "We must know. Who are to be our new Councillors?" A little hesitantly, twelve men and women come to the fore. "Show us." They raise up their colored squares to show the numbers. "Higher," Zimara urges. The chosen ones raise their hands higher, wondering if they'll be shot. Zimara steps between a man and a woman, holds their raised hands. "Now let's please clap for our Councillors!" And the crowd does, uncertainly.

"Now you must meet," Zimara tells the new officials. "Go to the church, and pick one man and one woman to speak for you. Make a list of what a good councillor should do. Then come back and tell us. We'll wait." She has the villagers bring out benches from the church.

By this time, Rekady has made several trips from the flatlands on an ATV, so the Brigade has stockpiled a couple crates of plum brandy, which now they pass around. Already the Zimaras have splurged magnificently on the fattest hogs in Meeyadz (as fat as they get in this hungry place). As the butchers bring out the newly disassembled animals, others gather wood for the firepits at the edge of the square. Soon the porks are spitted and sputtering above a merry blaze. By the time the new Council returns with its report, the square is bustling with the makings of a modest feast.

● Dirty Old Men

After a hard day at the office, the Archbishop likes to relax in the baths in the bowels of the monastery. Quite a cozy place. “Who knew?” says Father Antun. He sprawls with the Archbishop and others from the team, up to their shoulders in the steaming pool. “These monks with their sour faces, you’d never know how good they have it.”

“The place is a hole,” Nagahry replies. “Torkim thinks he won the lottery, but he’ll find out soon the cost of his elevation. These bitter old men will suck him dry. Scrape me, would you?” He offers Antun the back of his shoulders, and sighs with deep pleasure as the priest applies the edge of a wooden paddle, leaving faint welts. “But this part is OK. This is where we came when when we needed to get away from them. Of course, back then we didn’t have all the amenities.” His fist on a bottle, he sweeps his arm to take in the room: the gleaming new fixtures, the refrigerator for the beer, the massage room next door, the waterproof touch-screen comms here and there along the pool, the four-meter wall screen just above. Right now they’re watching a rerun of the Masked Crusader versus the Savage Turk.

Of course, there are no more Turks in these parts. They got chased out before the first world war. The Muslims here speak the same language and have the same ancestors as their Christian neighbors. Their great-great-grandfathers figured it was cheaper to convert than to pay the tax on Christians. Now their descendants are being herded into mosques and burnt alive for long-ago thrift.

“O,” the men say, with each thunderous fall. “Good one! Kill him!” The Archbishop owns a percent of the Masked Crusader, and a bigger piece of the Savage Turk. Panting fat men in underwear; it’s fast becoming the national pasttime, after futbol, church and murder.

Nagahry tosses the empty bottle into the pool, and yells for another. His calls echo down the stone corridors. A few meters away, the masseuse Lyerka recognizes the ugly mood, and refuses to go in.

“You go,” she tells Yesenya, who has come back with the Archbishop’s clothes, newly laundered. “Fetch them what they want from the refrigerator. Go! Or I’ll drown you myself.” And she thrusts the girl through the curtain.

Yesenya looks around at the panting fat men, naked.

“Come on. Don’t be shy,” the Archbishop beckons. “Closer, little girl. I just want to pinch you.” Yesenya backs out and runs, twisting fast to escape the reach of the masseuse. Echos of laughter follow her through the stone corridors.

"Mission work," Nagahry explains, and yells again for a bottle.

"Suffer the little children," guffaws the Archbishop's aide.

Eddie shouts for Lyerka to move her fat ass, and she slinks in and stops just inside the doorway. They curse and tell her what they want. After Lyerka has fetched more liquor for them all, and has been dragged into the pool and clambered out the other side, wet and terrified, Nagahry's mood changes.

"And where is our Brother Michael?" Nagahry asks. "He should be here. We have business."

"The Brother leaves his regrets. Some training event at the conference center."

Another offers, "The Brother doesn't like the baths."

"A dirty man," says the third, and regrets it immediately. No one laughs at Brother Michael.

"Come, come," the Archbishop says. "Some men are just not comfortable with other naked men. Means nothing at all." He rises out of the pool, reaches for the towel his aide hastens to get. "Tell you what. You sketch out next week's program and pin it to my comm. We'll talk later. If my commander is so busy, I must go to him."

"Yuk it up, fat man," Sevik says, watching the feed. The image is streaky, and Sevik jiggles the cables, to no avail; possibly the steam from the baths is messing up the signal.

Too bad the Archbishop didn't assault the girl right there, but Sevik already has plenty of sex files on the guy. They are of marginal use at best— short of screwing his daughters, or a man, there's not much the Archbishop can do that will distress the Crusader commanders or their paymasters in Kulkhiz. It's his insult to Brother Michael that will doom Nagahry. But not yet, not just yet.

● The Healing Process

"Should have shot them the first night," Mandalika complains about the Crusaders they've locked up.

Zimara shrugs. "We knew we'd have this problem. Here it's small, we can figure it out. That will help us later."

"Later?"

"Meeyadz is not our last stop. Did you think it was?"

What can they do with the mayor and his gunmen? They don't have a jail. It's a big pain to guard these guys in a flimsy shack. But if they try to fine them or confiscate their land, that will hurt their wives and kids, and nurture conspirators with a fixed interest in overthrowing the new regime. Without a doubt, shooting would have been easier.

Thug number one, tall kid calls himself Rex, is a slightly different case, so they take care of him first. He comes from Obeyyed, a town long held by the Crusaders. The Crusaders sent him here to keep an eye on the mayor, as they do in many villages. This practice turns out to be a handy wedge for the Zimaras, who soon prove adept at fostering mistrust among their enemies. Now the women let Rex contact his relatives in Obeyyed. Basically they ransom him off, and make his relatives come to fetch him. When he went off to join the Crusaders, Rex was the family's Golden Boy, their ticket to wealth and prestige; now he's an expensive embarrassment. His uncles barely look at him as they wait for the women to release him; and Rex follows them back down the track, head hung low.

The Zimaras call the ransom a fine for his crimes. Early on, Zimara decreed that collecting taxes for the Crusaders is a crime, which makes the mayor and his cops criminals by definition. But Zimara holds a public hearing to make it official. The village council is still too scared to take action against Crusaders, so the Brigade Council does the honors, and makes the village leaders attend. Other people trickle in, too; this is a spectacle they've never seen before. Arasely and homegirl Nisibis make the process as boring as possible, their best imitation of bureaucracy— impersonal, ritualistic, relentless. Upon due deliberation and windy paper shuffling —Nisibis is getting into the role— the Zimaras find

the mayor and the second cop guilty of stealing, sentence to be decided later. In the meantime they keep the mayor locked up, while releasing the other to his family.

The postponement gives the Zimaras time to work on their reluctant charges. Thug number two, everyone calls him Squinty, makes it easier. Since his poor performance the night the Brigade appeared, Squinty seems to have lost his fear of the invaders. He swaggers about, sneering at them and threatening the women of the village council. He tells several people he is going to sneak off to the Crusaders and bring an army back. Nisibis keeps a close eye on him through other village women, including Squinty's wife. So Nisibis knows when Squinty meets other men in secret, and which of them turn him down, and which meet him a second and third time.

Two of these co-conspirators disappear on successive days. Like, gone. That shuts Squinty up good. For a while it's rare to see him out at all, and when you do he wears this jumpy, look-over-the-shoulder demeanor. His wife broadcasts that she's going to leave Squinty, and sets about packing the old wagon they have. It takes a visit by Zimara herself, pistol in hand, to make the wife shut up and stay put. And why would the bandit leader protect this rank and file Crusader? His wife never does explain, leaving the neighbors to develop their own theories.

And one day Squinty too is gone. Off to bring word to the Crusaders, bring back an army, some of the men tell their wives. "Dimwit!" Vinka tells her boyfriend Sklab. "Squinty talked too much to the Zimaras and your pals knocked him off. And if they didn't tell you, it's because they don't trust you either."

Sklab hits the road two days later. Zimara sends Nisibis and Arasely around to question the other men Squinty has talked with. Somehow the Brigade seems to have acquired an awful lot of information about each man.

Early spring a boy named Ivo notices toes protruding from a snowdrift, near the main track where it emerges from the forest. It's Squinty all right, rearranged: private parts in his mouth, a bloody cross carved in his forehead.

"You scare me sometimes," Mandalika said then, as they rinsed off in an icy stream.

"Me, too," Zimara agreed. "Will it work?"

Apparently so. With Squinty's sudden absence, not much talk among the men of running off to the Crusaders. Not much talk among them about anything.

• Yesenya Will Wait

Yesenya comes by the baths bright and early the next morning, before the masseuse arrives, pushing a heavy cleaning cart. To her surprise, the gate is already open. She steps inside. She sees a man on a folding ladder working on something above the big wall screen. She recognizes him from the Tower of Penance. Curious, she watches from the doorway. She can't make out what he's doing. He's not one of the regular repair guys. He stoops now and then to pick a tool from a bag. Yesenya has got the comm with her, and takes a picture before she backs out.

Yesenya is mopping the corridor when Sevik comes out carrying the tool bag, the ladder slung over one shoulder. He passes her by without a glance, humming one of the monks' songs. She follows him around the corner. He unlocks a door marked Storage and goes in. He doesn't come out, so Yesenya goes back into the baths.

She flips aside a drop cloth so she can reach the ten gallons of cleaning caustic she has been pushing around. Each bottle sports a skull and crossbones. Goranka warned the girls to use only a tiny bit, to abrade two hundred year old plumbing. Yesenya hopes to burn the fat man and his buddies, until the skin peels off their pricks and balls. She hefts the first gallon and looks around. She slips a little on the wet tiles by the pool. She looks again at the wall screen, and above it, where the tower man was fiddling around. She remembers now: Zimara called him a spy.

Yesenya puts the bottle back on the cart and walks to the big wall screen. A tangle of cables snake from the poolside screens to the big TV and then through the wall. Small cylinders and boxes perch on the cables near the ceiling. One looks like a camera.

Yesenya wonders if tower man has been watching the Archbishop. She realizes with a chill Tower Man could be watching her right now. She turns her back to the camera, and bends to fiddle with the cleaning cart, thinking fast. Then she straightens up and steps to one side, out of camera range, if that's what it is, and takes another picture of the apparatus.

"What is she doing?" Sevik wonders, behind the screens in the storage room. The girl comes back into view, head down, listlessly slopping the mop this way and that, no energy, another lazy slob. She doesn't look up again. The image is good, no flickers or fadeouts like before. Sevik cuts the feed and heads back to his office.

Yesenya makes herself work slow and steady. She decides to leave without dumping the caustic in the bath. She'll set it aside in a locker, where she can get at it when she needs to. In the meantime, she wants to watch the fat man and the tower man, to figure out what they're doing.

When Yesenya tells Zimara about the box, Zimara has no idea what it might be, but trusts Yesenya's curiosity. "Let me ask around. Do you think you could get me a picture of the room?"

"I'm sending two to you now."

"O. Good girl. I see them." Zimara expands the first image. "It does look like a camera. And these men you saw, do you know who they are?"

"That's easy. The fat guy is the Archbishop. He's like the big boss. Whatever he wants, they run to get it for him. The other guy, I forget his name, but I sent you his picture. From the tower next to the church, remember? Doctor something."

"Sevik."

"That sounds right."

"He is dangerous," Zimara says. "You see him around, you go the other way. Understand?"

"Is he a big shot? I can watch him for you."

"You go the other way. I'm serious. Say it."

"OK, OK. I'll go the other way," she huffs.

• Hat Couture

Zimara posts fighters on the track either side of Meeyadz, and at a couple places in the hills above. They don't know all the footpaths in the woods, of course, but they hope to spot any large group before it gets too close. With Nisibis' help they recruit watchers from the little farms on the hillsides. The women at the roadblocks take their jobs very seriously, searching meticulously the occasional motorbike or ATV, treating everyone with grave courtesy. Zimara also wants to set up a militia.

The village women are intrigued by the Brigade. They find they like the image of women with guns. Some of the guys do too, but they are too shy to mention it, even to each other. Mandalika especially impresses the village. She always chooses the heaviest weapon she can find, and carries it with a practiced ease. Looks like she could drop the bruiser off her shoulder and shoot you with a smile, effortlessly. But it's the cowboy hat tilted just so that strikes some deep chord in their souls.

Soon several women volunteer for weapons training and sentry duty. And then the cowboy hats appear, adorning the new militiawomen. The first three or four are passable imitations of Mandalika's, in leather and cloth of many colors. Then the hats start to grow and curl upward like crazy mushrooms. Every day Zimara thinks she's seen the ultimate possible under the law of gravity, till she sees one even less likely. Within weeks they seem to have reached maximum size— brims spanning the shoulders, but propped just an inch or two above by ingenious folds and hidden braces. After that the variations are

mostly pattern and color. "Balkan Cowboy," Arasely calls these creations. The women mostly call them Mandalikas. Their exemplar just shakes her dashingly adorned head.

Zimara always looks for ways to reinforce the authority of her lieutenants. One day she sees an epicephalic eminence she fancies, not quite as fungoid as some but covered in purple brocade with little glass beads embedded. "Where do they find this material?" she wonders to Arasely. To the wearer, she says, "That's a lovely Mandalika. Do you think you could make me one like it?" The artist is only too happy to oblige. Zimara takes to wearing it every Tuesday.

Zimara starts up a reading class, and teaches two nights a week. She recruits Gret as her assistant, and the girl does a great job; she can read as well as Zimara, or better.

At first some of the group leaders wonder why Zimara spends time helping women write their names, when there are so many more urgent tasks. But soon they see how much Zimara likes the class, how much it relaxes and refreshes her. Also, it's a good way for her to get to know the women of Meeyadz.

• Contentions and Initiatives

Since the old priest died, the church is a mess from long neglect. The village council cleans it up and takes it for their meeting place. Arasely sits in on the meetings. She reports about the Brigade and answers any questions the villagers might have. No one has to say it, but they know she's also there as the velvet glove over the iron fist: the Brigade is paying attention, and has high expectations. Arasely is a patient mom, and she picked up some organizational experience at New Start, so she's a good fit for this task.

The new councillors are pretty confused, but with Arasely's gentle prodding, they start to take their jobs seriously. That frantic shuffling of number slips the first day ensured that some at least of the councillors are seen as leaders by their neighbors, of whom some don't mind the role.

The meetings are open to everyone. By the third gathering, it seems the councillors will not be shot, and other people start to come to hear the discussion. It's a great novelty. A man named Ranke sets up a little cart in the street outside, to sell hot tea and little bags of sunflower seeds. Slowly the stories come out.

They hear, for instance, that the ex-mayor's pal Gulbenk owns a lot of sheep and goats, employs four shepherds, and forces himself upon their wives. Hard to figure what to do with him, since almost any punishment would fall heaviest on his family, and the scandal would harm his victims. Eventually the Council decides to make him deed over his property to the wife. If he pisses her off, he gets the boot. Also, the shepherds get a raise.

The local tinkerer sees his chance, and brings up once again his plan to install mini-turbines along a few of the many mountain creeks. They'd have electricity year-round, and wouldn't have to depend so much on fuel trucks making it up the mountain every summer. A good idea, but still way beyond current resources. Nevertheless, the Council sets aside two hundred riyal for him to search out sites and hardware.

In these parts, logging is a big source of income and of contention. Who owns that patch of forest? Arguments complicated, sometimes, by twisty marriage and inheritance arrangements. The new Council has to adjudicate these, with no more than oral tradition to guide them. The old mayor, pre-Borko, claims to know the land codes by heart, but no one has actually seen them in a generation. The Zimaras end up having to send off to Saray for a copy.

Then there are the wise guys looking for a short cut— including people who actually have the right side of a case. They figure Arasely is the power behind the Council, so they approach her with gifts. The cleverest start small at first, knowing it's easier that way for do-gooders to get used to receiving favors and reciprocating. (O these pure-minded reformers. So easy to seduce.) All this is relative, of

course. Really, in a place like Meeyadz, all the bribes are small. They range from stingy to miserly. No one can afford more.

Arasely has never been bribed before —she finds it somewhat flattering— but none of this is a shock to her. She saw very much the same behavior among Detsch and the other big shots in Echmash. So she turns down the bribes, scolds the bribers, and reports all attempts to the Brigade leadership. With their concurrence, she does not punish the corruptors or make a big deal of it in public. She knows a few arrests cannot change a way of life.

One day, though, Arasely gets two offers in as many hours. Fed up, she takes the bribes and promises to reward her new friends. Next day she donates all the money to the village Council, praising the anonymous donors, and assuring them God will repay them one hundredfold. The Councillors understand very well what's happened, and get a big laugh out of it, as well as a lesson. After that, would-be bribers have to be more circumspect, or quit entirely.

Arasely notices one woman who brings a little girl and a teenage boy. They sit in the back, away from the others, and Arasely can see why: the woman wears a crucifix gouged into her cheek, much like Zimara had. She does not speak, but watches the proceedings almost hungrily. The girl plays with palm-sized wooden toys while the boy sits patiently, nailbitten hands clasped in his lap, goggling around the room as if not sure what to look at. Arasely asks Nisibis.

"That's Shpresa. Husband died in debt, they lost their farm. And then— "

"Borko?"

"Him? No. Just the Dildos they invited to our village, who stayed six weeks, amused themselves with us. They took a special interest in the boy. He's . . . " she waves her hand, "not right in the head. Shpresa tried to defend him."

"Where do they live? How do they live?"

"I hear the family is still at the old place. The new owner lets them stay in the toolshed, goodness of his heart. He and others hire her sometimes to care for their kids or animals."

After the meeting Arasely catches up with trio just outside the door. "I was admiring your toy," she says to the little girl. "Would you let me see it?" Shyly the girl hands up the toys—a miniature tractor, a plane, and a flower, crudely done.

"I like these. What's your name?" Arasely asks.

The girl puts her finger in her mouth. The mom says, "This is Sara." She puts a rough brown hand on the boy's shoulder. "This is Vlaznim." The boy's eyes wander everywhere, sliding off faces.

"And you're Shpresa, I know. Do you know where I can get one of these?"

"Those are mine," Shpresa says, almost belligerently.

"Yes, but where did they come from? I'd like some for my kids."

"I made them."

"Pretty."

"They're not. Best I could do without my tools."

"You've made more of these?"

"Me and Leevor, we make beds, chairs, doors, storage . . . toys, sometimes, for the kid, you know . . . except Leevor's dead. I sold his tools," she says, jaw thrust out, as if daring Arasely to challenge her, or daring herself to cry.

"Of course. We have to feed our families. Tell me, though, why do you come to Council meetings?"

Shpresa blinks. She hadn't thought about it. "I like to hear them. They talk this way, and that way, but I think . . . it seems like they want to . . . anyway, they're trying to get at something." She shrugs. "It seems important." Arasely walks with her a few minutes more.

Next day, Arasely goes with Poscheel and Nisibis to talk with the new owner of Shpresa's farm. The guy does not live there —he has another place farther down the mountain— so Arasely wonders aloud

about the chances of Shpresa's family moving back to the farmhouse. "She'd have to pay some rent, of course."

The guy strokes his beard and allows as how that might be a possibility. The three women pool their cash, just enough to get Shpresa's tools out of hock. Next week the village Council decides the church needs new shutters and repairs on the altar screen. It's Shpresa's first job under the new management.

When Zimara hears about Shpresa, she stops by the home one evening with Gret and Aloyzi. Zimara figures it wouldn't hurt for her kids, and maybe Shpresa's, to see another woman who has survived this kind of disfiguring assault. The women talk about carpentry and woodcraft, and Zimara's now-and-again work with embroidery and Tsaynay masks. The little girl is a year older than Aloyzi, and shows him how to make toys from cloth and straw. Gret doesn't get anywhere with Vlaznim, but wants to come back and try again.

• Major Donor

Avbury goes to New York every winter, to raise money for New Start refugee center. This time she sets up a meeting with one of her regular donors but does not mention New Start. The donor is a short, dainty, beautiful woman with gold hoops in her ears. Her name is Melanie. They sit on a bench in the great hall of the donor's museum, amid the hubbub of visiting schoolchildren.

"I have a story," Avbury tells her. The Doctor describes how she met Arasely and Zimara and the other Zimaras from the camp, and how they've gone back to get their kids, and fight the Crusaders, and protect the other women of the villages. It has been less than a year since Zimara pulled herself from the river.

"Good story," Melanie agrees, a little skeptically.

"I've seen it," Avbury tells her.

"Go on."

"I know them. They are smart and determined, and they've had some success. More and more women are joining the group."

"People join gangs all the time. A sad fact of our world."

"You are right to be wary. But if this is a gang, it's different from anything I've seen before. As you know, I've been here and there."

"I know."

"Keep in mind, this movement is entirely home-grown." (Avbury does not yet understand how important her own example has been to the women who end up at New Start.) "These are people from the towns and villages, responding to the war. Everything I've seen and heard —and we get constant updates from incoming refugees— the fighters make every effort to be fair to each other and to the country people."

"Clearly your Zimara is an extraordinary person. Why doesn't she just take her kids and head to the EU?"

"I suggested that myself." Avbury flicks her hand. "She wants to stay and help women. She believes this is something she has to do."

"Destiny?"

"She has never said that. But yes, I think maybe that's what she feels."

"So what happens when they kill her?"

Avbury nods. "They've got a pretty strong leadership, but yes, if they lost Zimara and a couple of the others, I don't know what would happen then. Conceivably they'd end up just another gang of

predators." She glances over at her donor. "That's why it's important to help them now, set them on a track they won't turn back from."

Melanie studies the Viterbo on the wall. It portrays a servant girl standing behind a tall, broad-shouldered woman, tying an apron string for her. The woman wears an elaborate headpiece, adorned with a feathers and a string of pearls. At their feet the a heavy sword leans against a basket; it looks like it will take two hands to raise. A guard in armor sprawls by the entrance to a tent, mouth gaping, his arm stretched toward an upended chalice. The chalice, sword, jeweled headpiece, soldier's helmet and the women's eyes gleam in the light from a torch. Inside the tent, two candles and the glimmer of naked legs and hairy ass on a rumpled bed.

"Judith and Holofernes show up in several paintings at this time. The Italians, of course, were no strangers to political murder. I guess they were as intrigued as we are with the idea of a woman killer." Melanie's eyes roam the painting greedily.

"This is my favorite of the genre. We don't see the murder itself, the gushing head held high. Instead, two women getting ready. No excitement, just a kind of tired determination. They don't talk. They know already what they have to do. Judith has on her finest clothes, and then an apron over them. She seems more experienced, a little more matter-of-fact than the girl. She is going to take care of Holofernes like she'd cut up a chicken, take out the garbage, or clean shit from a baby. Unpleasant work, but it has to be done. Women's work." Melanie fishes for her comm, checks something, puts it back. "As always, I appreciate your candor. I don't suppose you can tell me what they'd use my money for."

Avbury gives a slight shrug. "Given their situation, I'm sure you can imagine the kinds of things they need— and why they don't want to be leaving a paper trail. If I could I would have brought you documents and videos."

Melanie waves her slender, perfectly pampered fingers. "Of course, I understand."

"You could visit the camp. I can bring Zimara or her partners to meet you."

"That won't be necessary." She rises. "Thanks. You've given me a lot to think about." She shakes Avbury's hand. "You always bring me something interesting, Doctor."

By the time Avbury lands in Geneva, on her way back to the refugee camp, there's a message waiting for her. "I found this in my jacket pocket when I got back home last night," Avbury's daughter tells her. A much-folded piece of paper, the Doctor's name on the outside in faint, spidery writing that Avbury does not recognize. On the inside, short instructions to access an account at a bank in Saray. The account is named Epirus. It comes with a paragraph describing a real estate investment trust headquartered on the Adriatic. Avbury is not one of the two people named in the document —they are Burmese children who died in the last pandemic— but that doesn't matter, because she has the access number.

"This has got to last you six months," the note continues. "After that— depends on whether I like what I hear. I found others who want to hear your story. Come back soon, or send Miryam."

Turns out to be 200,000 Euro— that's an awful lot of riyal. The beautiful woman's pastime is looting art treasures from around the world, an ugly profession, but handy when you want to slide cash here and there untraceably.

• Squeeze

They have taken care of Meeyadz' crooked cops. What about Mayor Borko? "I know these assholes," Arasely says, thinking of Echmash' finest. "Leave him to me."

They meet in the back of the church. Arasely sits on a bench, wrapped in a heavy jacket, breath steaming from her mouth, thumbing her comm now and then. Borko sits on the stone floor, ziptied hands in his lap. Nisibis stands to one side, propped against the door, tapping impatiently at the barrel of

a machine pistol. She knows Borko well, and bitterly. Her presence limits the amount of crap that extrudes from his mouth.

"You're not a mayor. You are a robber," Arasely tells him right off. "A thief, an asshole. You've stolen from everyone here. From Nisibis' poor old ma and da, they have no money, so you took their chickens. You and Squinty. By the way, what has happened to Squinty?"

Borko spends his time locked in the shed behind the church, except when Arasely comes to fetch him. She reports on the progress of the investigation, shaking her head. "It's really incredible. They say you sent Rex and Squinty to steal their food in the middle of winter. The way I see it, that's the same as murder. They say you stole Katitsa's sheep when Dalib left on Crusade."

Borko is about to speak but Nisibis strides over and drops the barrel of her pistol to his forehead "Shut up, Borko!" she snarls."No more bullshit!" Borko shuts up.

Arasely explains, "You'll have a chance to give your proofs at your trial. Smart for you right now to listen. You should understand what your prospects are."

Another day Borko asks for more food. "Cabbage, please. My teeth are coming loose. My guts hurt all the time."

"But you're just beginning to regain your youthful figure," Nisibis observes.

"Then shoot me now."

Arasely declines. "O, no. The villagers would never forgive us."

"We have something else in mind for you," Nisibis chimes in. Borko's eyes bug a little. He doesn't like where this is going.

Arasely considers. "I can get you food. What will you do for me?"

Another day:

"I have committed so many crimes. I deserve to be shot." Borko does his best to look penitent. Mostly he looks scared.

"That's what I told Zimara," Arasely says.

"I know I can never make up for my crimes," he says, hopefully. "Nothing I can do can ever earn your forgiveness."

"True enough," Arasely observes. "You might have given us information, but you wasted time spinning lies. You think I'm stupid. We got all we need from Rex and Squinty."

"Those morons! They don't know anything!"

"Really? What don't they know?"

"Things," Borko says. "Important things." He thinks he's being clever.

"Like the time you hid the Crusaders here while they planned the attack on the police station in Rzen? Like the Archbishop's couriers you shelter when they cross the border at Mount Krk? You know, maybe the villagers will have to wait. Maybe we should rent you to the Political Police." Under the old regime, the generals relied on the Political Police to terrorize the opposition. Torture, rape and murder were their ever-ready tools. Since they took over, the Liberals claim to have reformed the PoPo, but no one wants to test the theory.

"Wait. No need to do that," Borko argues. "There's plenty I can tell you."

Arasely tears a blank sheet of paper from her notebook and drops it on the floor. She puts a pen in his hand and closes his fingers around it. "Then you better start. Time is running out for you, Borko."

Another day she tells him, "The people are getting impatient. They want us to hand you over to them— and your house and land as well. All stolen property, isn't it? Did I say they hate your guts?"

"If my death can free the women of Meeyadz, may Jesus strike me down this minute," Borko declares, raising his eyes to heaven.

"Unfortunately, Zimara insists on proper procedure. 'It's only fair to let him speak in his own defense,' she says. We all love Zimara, but sometimes she can be too soft-hearted."

They let Borko's wife visit him sometimes. "The whole village despises us," she tells him. "They'll take our land, our home. Little Stemka will starve."

"You must be strong," he tells her. "Come Spring, the Dildos –I mean the Crusaders— will be back. I'll be boss again."

"Are you out of your mind? You think the Dildos give a shit about Meeyadz? Or you?" She spits on the ground. "No one cares about this village, except the Zimaras."

"What can I do?"

"Do what you have to do. Take care of your family."

Next day Nisibis wakes Borko with a boot to the ribs. Arasely stands beside her. Borko is curled up in a blanket on the floor.

"This is very distressing," Arasely announces. "I hear you raped Katitsa while Dalib was gone. Is that true?"

Borko struggles to sit up. "God no! I'd never do such a thing! Dalib is a Crusader— "

"Don't worry about the Crusaders. They aren't coming back. Come on, Borko, focus. You need to worry about me."

"No, no! It wasn't rape. It was her idea— " He stops when he sees the look on the women's faces.

Arasely does not reply for a good while. Then, sadly: "Zimara thinks there's good in everyone. 'Even Mayor Borko,' she told me. 'Find the good in him.' I'm trying, but you make it very hard. What do you think Katitsa will say when we ask her?"

Borko throws his hands to his face. "I didn't do anything." But he's choking so bad he's hard to understand.

"That's what Katitsa says, too. But you know, even if you can't get it up, it's still rape."

"Wait a minute!" Borko protests. "Wait a minute! I — " but he won't say any more.

"Do you know what the Brigade does to rapists?" Arasely asks. "Before you open your mouth again, I want you to think very carefully, Borko."

"What do you want?" he begs.

"You know what we want."

He doesn't, actually. He racks his brain for something to offer, something they don't have already. Mayor Borko is a mean country boy, but not very valuable. He doesn't know much beyond Meeyadz. He has never been to Hidris, never met Brother Michael. He does however know Golot, the mayor of Kavkaz, an impoverished dump the other side of the mountain. It's six times the size of Meeyadz, and the likeliest source of attack. Golot and Borko have done business together, none of it legal. Arasely offers Borko a chance to redeem himself by spying on Kavkaz.

"I can do that. The mayor there trusts me. What do you want to find out?"

So they release him, promising a trial when they finish the investigation. Arasely makes it very clear to Borko's family that they'll lose their house and land and animals if he takes off; so they watch him like a hawk.

Arasely reports the latest Borko download to the Brigade Council before hurrying off to attend the Village Council meeting. Lemane shakes her head. "She cracked him like an eggshell. And she seems like such a sweet person."

Zimara says, "She is— perfectly sweet, and relentless. A good mom. Doesn't do to underestimate our Arasely."

● Souvenirs

The Brigade has restarted the school, for girls and boys both. Miryam the interpreter spends a long day shopping in Saray, and sends a crateful of books.

Gret and Aloyzi stay just a couple blocks from the school. They wave to Damyana on their way out the door. Once they're out of earshot, Gret pulls her brother close.

"I think Damyana took my treasure box."

"O yeah. She steals all the time."

"She does? You've seen her?" Gret is amazed.

"You know when Arasely's kids were visiting? I saw her go through their packs."

"She saw you see her?"

Aloyzi shrugs. "She said she was giving them apples. And she showed me the apples. But she was looking, too. She goes into homes and cars. I don't think she takes much. If she wants my snakeskin, she can have it." Aloyzi picks up a stick and tries it out. Yes! A good swooshing noise.

"No one wants your snakeskin."

"What's in your treasure box?" he asks.

"Pictures. Dad and me."

"Who cares about Yorg?" He swats a pebble but it doesn't move very far. Gret bites her lip. More kindly, Aloyzi advises, "For heaven's sake, Gret, if you're mad, just tell Zimara."

But she doesn't. She figures her mom doesn't want to be bothered with petty stuff. It's not petty to Gret, though.

Damyana has her own treasure box. An old doll of Gret's, a toy dinosaur from Arasely's youngest, an anklet Mandalika took off in the showers, a picture of a smiling old couple standing by a vegetable cart— someone's grandparents probably, she doesn't know who. Gret's right, Damyana doesn't want Aloyzi's tattered old snakeskin. Damyana is always polite to Aloyzi, but she doesn't like him. Her prize possession is a folded paper with a lock of curly black hair from when she gave Zimara a haircut.

Damyana is very clever. She stuffs these treasures into the lining of an old coat at the bottom of a cardboard carton, under scarves and worn boots. She takes them out to look at when she's alone.

• Structure

The Village Council collects taxes for Meeyadz —much less than the mayor extorted for the Crusade— but the Brigade pays its own way, with the money it steals from Crusaders, or the profits from smuggling. So it's a bit of a boost for the tiny local economy, hosting their very own gang. Within a week of the takeover Zimara hires a crew of local men and women to help build shelters for the Brigade, very simple at first. They use land owned by the families of Brigade members— Nisibis and Poscheel initially, others later on as more women join the Brigade. And they build not just for the sixteen Zimaras who came first. There are at least as many women in armed bands in other places, and many more still at New Start, waiting for the summons. Before they can come, though, Mandalika and the supply committee have to figure out how to feed so many mouths. Meanwhile, they have plenty of wood and stone, so the building program proceeds apace. They hire locals to regrade the road up the mountain, adding high stone walls in two places to serve as choke points. By Spring Zimara hopes to be able to triple the Brigade presence in Meeyadz.

This is also when the Brigade takes shape as an organization.

The Brigade Council consists of the group leaders, the *prihvadji.* Their job is equal parts command, negotiation, and representing their members. They are accountable to the members of their groups and to the Council as a whole; no easy task. Together the prihvadji set both long term policy and immediate tactical goals-- for instance, where to raid next. Most of these women are fighters. The noncombatants have their own prihvadj, Anastasiye, who sits in on the meetings, and complains regularly that the fighters have too narrow a focus. Each prihvadj picks a Second, to take over in case she gets hurt.

The Council recognizes Zimara as Senior Councillor, meaning she can call meetings and put items on the agenda, as the Council as a whole can do as well.

"I'll take the job for a year," Zimara tells them. "After that, we vote again." Despite her official modesty, Zimara remains the most influential voice, the woman hardest to challenge. They are all brave and smart. Zimara has the clearest vision of what the Collective and Brigade could be, and expresses it most forcefully.

Zimara makes her first demand right away. "I want every prihvadj to know how to read and write. We have a lot to learn, and a lot to pass on to our people in other places. Paper is easier to hide than comms, and forces us to choose our words. Reading is only going to get more important as we grow. We must know how to do it."

Arasely backs her up. "It's hard. I'm still not very good at it. But I think how important it is for the other women and girls to see us do this."

"The men, too," Emiliye says. "They need to know we can do this."

"They know that already," Lalekshany scoffs. "That's why they forbid it. They are afraid."

Mandalika looks like she's about to cry. No one has ever before seen this expression on her face. None of them has heard of dyslexia.

Zimara softens a little. "Don't worry, we have time. Anyone needs it, I'll find someone to work with you."

As the Brigade takes on new members, it develops rules and protocols. Every member must belong to a group. Once a commitment has been made, no one may refuse to take part in an action. They may, however, apply to change groups. It's a pressure release valve, to limit conflict when group members just can't get along. Such a step is not taken lightly; if she's not accepted into another group, the applicant must leave the Brigade. Together in Council the prihvadji review the transfers, and discuss the reasons.

Some are naturally more popular than others. Because their members can opt out, all group leaders have an incentive to keep the women safe and deal with them fairly. Some of the prihvadji are new to this kind of authority, but others have long experience with informal village politics. They look to each other for cues and learn fast from their mistakes. Because they depend on each other for all sorts of operational support, they control temptations to aggrandize their own group at the expense of the Brigade as a whole.

When a group gets too big they split it up and assign part to a new prihvadj. Thus, no single leader commands a group much larger than the rest, though she might continue to influence daughter groups indirectly.

The option to transfer gives the fighters more confidence, keeps the prihvadji on their toes, and generates intense loyalty to successful leaders. Oddly enough, the most popular prihvadji tend to be the most demanding. At this stage, no woman joins the Brigade because it is the easiest option for her. Much later on, the Council will find that some women seek to join solely to take advantage of the Brigade's success. Then they have to become more rigorous about screening applicants.

Any member of the Brigade or Collective may give notice to quit, and may leave after operations they know about have been completed. There is a small, steady turnover, mostly women who get scared, or to take care of family obligations.

More women join than leave. The Brigade accepts new recruits recommended by current members or by Miryam and Doctor Avbury at New Start. Crusader attacks ensure that there's always a pool of displaced and desperate women.

At first the Zimaras aren't too concerned about informers. For the most part, they are physically isolated in small groups in remote areas. By the time they expand into the lowlands, they have developed strong loyalties to each other. Another factor is that for a long time the Crusaders don't even

consider cultivating women snitches. In fact, it's risky for any woman to approach a Crusader captain, whatever her intentions. Later the Brigade will have more cause to worry.

What makes an effective group leader? This is an ongoing discussion in Council, constantly informed by new experience. To keep the trust of their groups, prihvadji have to be fair, listen with an open mind, hold members accountable, anticipate problems, make decisions under stress, and learn from their mistakes. And because each has her own leadership style, that's one more thing they come to value: that every woman has something important to contribute. It's up to the group leaders to see the potential in their members and to make sure everyone has a role.

At the same time, the prihvadji feel a strong responsibility to each other and the decisions they make together as the Council. They know their fuckups put the whole organization at risk. Carelessness can kill their friends. Even more important, the Council promotes a strong sense of mutual accountability.

Zimara has been smart and lucky in choosing the first group leaders. Over time they grow more effective and more confident.

● Tech Support

When Kut and his Lieutenant see Yesenya's photos of Sevik's surveillance setup, they call in one of the techs. "Big gear," he calls it. "Where is this?"

"Can't tell you. Let's just say, if we could see what this machine is seeing, it would be a big deal."

The tech runs a hand through his hair and launches into a semi-intelligible explanation of the possibilities. "Typically a device like this links to a whole network, not just one screen. If I can sit down with it for an hour, I can reprogram to give us full access."

"So the people who run this machine wouldn't know."

"So it would be very hard for them to find out."

Lieutenant Djordjevich says, "You got a few minutes on comm with an eleven-year-old."

"You're kidding."

"That's our insider."

"No way. I couldn't tell you how to do it. It would take all day."

Kut walks up and down, stroking his jaw. "What's the critical piece here? To see what they're seeing, would we have to reset every device?"

"No, no. If I could get my hands on the trafficker, it would slave the others."

"Trafficker?"

The tech taps the screen with a stylus. "This little doodad right here. Sort of a cylinder with a snap top."

"So let's get one," the Captain says.

"What do you mean?"

"Can you get me one of these, what did you call it?"

"I can get it. High end. High price."

"Just like we see in the picture."

"Right. Just like that. Same model."

"So get one for us. You fix it so we can listen in. Then our challenge is not to reprogram this other guy's device— "

"We replace the one in that room with our own," the Lieutenant concludes.

"What do you think? Is that something a kid could do?" Kut asks.

“A kid, sure. A smart kid?”

“She’s smart.”

“Pull out the cables and plug in the new one. Key in the authorization. We’ll tell her how to do it.”

● Rekady Encantado

Rekady makes a point to bring little gifts to Zimara whenever he shows up with a supply column. What could delight an emerging folk hero? A brace of lightweight machine pistols? Night-vision goggles? The latest model drone killer? What Rekady mostly brings her is bags of oranges and boxes of the little cakes the women make at the refugee camp — he no longer works there, but visits often— and toy dinosaurs for her kids. He's pleased to find Zimara likes gooey cakes, and enraptured to watch her bite into them. She looks forward to his visits, and his hilarious tales of the smuggler's life. She finds it curious one day when, just as he arrives, her commanders find they have pressing business elsewhere.

The second time she is furious, and storms out of the office. She catches up with Arasely shooting the breeze with the other women. "What's going on?"

Arasely looks up slyly. "You need instructions?"

"I won't be mocked."

"No one's mocking you. You see us smile when you smile."

"I'm not smiling. Whatever you think, I don't have time for this."

"You better make time."

"What does that mean?"

Arasely sighs. How to explain to this stubborn woman? "Look, why do you do this? You got your kids. You can leave this God-damned country."

Zimara glares.

"You tell yourself, 'I love the women. I love the people.'" Arasely pokes Zimara in the shoulder. "That's a damn lie. At least don't lie to yourself. You can't love The People. I can't love The People. We just have to love the people we love." Arasely pauses, then asks, "Do you love me?"

Zimara is ready with a speech, but then says simply, "Yes."

"Good. I love you too. It's a start. You need more practice."

At this point Rekady saunters past, straining to hear. He walks to his truck, turns around, grins, waves.

Zimara feels betrayed by her friends, her officers, her own lack of discipline. Her mind screams Danger. Next time Rekady comes by he is barely out of the truck before Zimara takes his arm. She is resolved to ignore the others nearby, and leads him out of earshot. "You want to see me alone?"

"Of course." He looks down at her, a little amused.

"Don't give me that look."

So he explains. "I like you, Senior Councillor. I’d like to spend some time with you. If you would like."

She searches his eyes, nods. "We could try it. But you can't report to me anymore. You'll report to Mandalika." She turns to their audience a little ways off, and shouts, "He reports to Prihvadj Mandalika." She tells him, "If she fires you, you're fired. If she says, 'Shoot him," they'll shoot you. Understand?"

"Perfectly. But tell me— if they shoot me, will you weep?"

"Yes."

"OK. So invite me to dinner."

So that's part of how Zimara remembers to love, not The People, but the people she loves.

Zimara doesn’t need reminding how to fuck. She used to like it, and likes it now even more.

"What are you laughing about?"

"I'm smiling," Rekady answers. "You are loud. Exciting."

• Eddie Has a Way with Women

Before he leaves Rudomil, the Archbishop makes a final round of his little flock. He finds the women waiting at sundown for the truck to take them back to their barracks. He works the weary crowd, squeezing hands and patting the heads of little kids. He puts his nose up to Yesenya's. He can't remember where he's seen her.

Father Antun and a monk have brought a folding platform, and set it up on the curb. The truck is just pulling up when Nagahry climbs the steps and calls the women to attention. It's a tough crowd. The workers are hungry and stunned by exhaustion.

"Ladies, I'm sorry to say that I've been hearing disturbing reports from the captains. They say that sometimes they've seen you standing around, not working, resting on your knees or leaning on your mops. The men's barracks are filthy, and you don't clean them fast enough.

"Worst of all, they feel you are not treating our heroes with respect. I told them I didn't believe it but they assured me this is true.

"Now, I can understand, sometimes you see our warriors returning from the front, tired and short-tempered, and maybe you just want to get out of their way. But if our boys seem a little rough sometimes, it's because of the sacrifices they've made to protect you— you and all women and children. They stand between you and the most vile abuse by a godless sex-crazed culture. Without them you are helpless. They have so many worries and responsibilities. So, next time you see a warrior returning from the field of battle, I want you to greet them with joy and gratitude. Your job is to hold them up when they fall down; it's the woman's touch that makes all the difference."

"And would it hurt to slap on a little lipstick? Spruce yourselves up, ladies! Show these boys you're glad they're home!"

At this point Eddie's well-trained congregation in Djemdjad would have their arms in the air, shouting praise. These peasants here have not had the benefits of his care over the years. Goranka, standing by the door of the cab of the truck, calls an abrupt "Amen!" and waves her hand. The women shuffle onto the back of the truck.

The Archbishop refuses to be put out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear . . . . At last Eddie is on his way out of this dump. He'll be back in Djemdjad by midnight.

• Whose Name Is Jealous

Damyana doesn't like Rekady one bit. She always acts friendly when she sees him, but she prays that God will strike this corruptor and forgive Zimara's fornication. Damyana feels a secret power: only her prayers stand between Zimara and damnation.

Damyana is disturbed as well when the former smuggler tries to spend time with Aloyzi and Gret, and pleased when they resist.

It's Gret who is the most suspicious. She thinks someday her dad could come back. Aloyzi is less sentimental. He basks in any adult attention he can get.

Rekady consults with Zimara. "Is Gret mad at me? Tell me if there's something I should be doing."

"Don't crowd her," she advises. "She's been through too many changes. Just give her time. I like you. She'll like you, too."

Damyana, listening, starts to think she'll need a new job.

• Cooperation

Not all the men are hostile jerks. Many have their own reasons for hating the Crusade. Some seem to understand what the Zimaras are trying to do.

One day Nisibis stops in Goran's shop for soap and salt. He's an old guy with a warty face and bad teeth. When the only other customer leaves, Goran says, "I can tell you where to find some guns." According to him, Lughi and Gorce buried a cache of grenades and AKs in the woods.

"How do you know this?"

"This was the same week you came. I heard them bragging. Then I followed them." Goran gives her directions where to find the weapons.

Nisibis takes a crew to the site that night, with shovels. Sure enough, just as Goran said. They take away their haul, and carefully fill in the hole. Then they get one of the women who lives nearby to keep watch on the place. Three weeks later she reports that Gorce went there at night with an empty bag—and came hurrying out again, bag still empty. He looked mightily distressed, she says. The Zimaras take no further action, besides adding Gorse and Lughi to Arasely's growing database.

Nisibis waits one evening till the lights go out, then raps on the shop door. The old man sees her through the window and opens the door without turning on the lights. Nisibis slips inside.

"I appreciate your help. Let us know if we can help you."

Goran shrugs. Nisibis can't see the gesture in the darkness. She says, "Give me a sign."

"What do you mean?"

"Make a sign on a piece of paper. Something no one else will know." So he finds a piece of paper and scribbles on it in the dark. Nisibis holds it up to the faint light from the window: a circle transfixed by two curvy lines. "Looks like a flying saucer landed in a river. OK. You can talk to me when I come to shop. If you need to reach us in a hurry, send a note with this sign. Do you know Arasely?"

"The little woman, dark."

"Right. She or me."

So now and then Goran offers other tidbits about local goings-on. The Zimaras check them against other sources as best they can; Goran is always accurate.

One day Goran has another shopkeeper waiting for Nisibis. This guy claims to have the entire set of village records buried in his back yard.

"Why would you do that?"

"We know what the Dildos do when they come. That's what they did. And they would have burnt the ownership documents to cover up."

As the people of Meeyadz lose fear of the Zimaras, more and more complaints emerge about Borko's predations. What's most dangerous —what can bring people to the brink of starvation— is when the Crusaders take over a family's land and livestock. But records in Borko's office make it look like he and his enforcers have owned half the mountain since time immemorial. There's even an old copper mine listed in the name of the martyred Captain Blago.

Now the Zimaras have documents to match against the villagers' claims. They begin to set things right.

• Outreach

Then there are the Muslims.

"Three families hide in the woods," Nisibis tells the prihvadji. "They lost their homes and flocks."

"How do they get by, then?"

"They move product for the pill factories in Hidris, and the occasional fugitive from God's Kingdom. There are still Muslims hiding there, and trying to get out."

Mandalika says, “I sense a new source of tax revenue.”

“Probably not much. The main weight goes through Golot’s gang in Kavkaz. But the Crusaders take a big cut of that. So Golot diverts a little over the mountain, tax-free, as it were.”

Zimara asks, “Do they steal from our people?”

Nisibis figures not. “No complaints so far. Wisely, they would rather not draw attention.” She picks at a scab on her elbow. “You should know: These families didn’t just run away. They fought the Crusaders very well. That’s why there are only a few younger guys left. These men are fighters.”

The Council doesn’t know how much reaching out to the Muslims is going to undermine the fragile trust they’re building with the rest of Meeyadz’ people. They don’t know whether the Muslims will respond at all.

“We’ve got to try,” Arasely says.

“Why?” Anastasiye asks. “We’ve got plenty of other work to do. Let them be. If they want to come down the mountain, we won’t stop them. But why should we go to a lot of extra effort to invite them?”

“They won’t come out on their own. For all they know, the people who burned their homes are still here and waiting to kill them,” Nisibis points out.

“Because,” says Zimara, “killing Muslims is the first thing the Crusaders promise. What do they say before every attack? ‘We’re going to protect you from the Muslims, and Jews, and the false priests, and the West.’” She taps her cheek. “We know how they protect us. We know what they really want. And we can’t let them use those excuses any more. We can’t tell ourselves we don’t like their methods but their goals are OK.” She looks around the table. “Do we understand this?”

It seems they do. Some of the women nod. A couple shrug.

Mandalika says, “I see it this way. We need all the help we can get. Especially we need a way to bring men to stand with us. What better way than to start with the people who can never compromise with the Crusade?”

Zimara has to smile. She likes these women, and the way they combine principle and practice. “So: how do we contact these elusive people?”

Nisibis says, “Young guy Jaafar stops at Goran’s shop every few weeks, to stock up on flour and tobacco. But he’s not going to tell us anything. I think we have to go to them.”

“You know them. Why don’t you take Daneetsa with you?”Arasely suggests.

Nisibis shakes her head. “Better you than me. They have little reason to trust local Christians.” In the end, they decide to send Arasely, Nisibis and the girl Lalekshany.

Arasely wonders, “Should we take our guns? I don’t want to seem like invaders.”

“Seeing people wander the woods without weapons, that would make anyone suspicious,” Zimara thinks. “No, take what you need.”

The women pack heavy and trek half a day up the mountain. It’s easier once they get to the ridgetops, where the snow isn’t so deep. Their labor and the bright sun keep them warm. Fine windsprayed snow stings their faces. The sparkle makes the air itself seem crystalline.

They stop to eat near noon, bread and bean paste, in a companionable silence. Nisibis points to wisps of smoking rising above the trees into blue blue sky. When they shoulder up again, she says, “Now would be a good time to play your player.”

Arasely has brought a Noys, with a selection of her favorite love songs. She turns it on.

Lalekshany rolls her eyes at the corny music. She asks, “Do you want them to see us coming?”

“They see us already. I want them to know we are not sneaking up on them.” They follow a snow-smothered stream by its friendly burble.

They are met in a clearing by a boy with a rifle. He stands several meters away, just this side of a line of trees. The women wait patiently while he scans them. He murmurs something into his handheld, then points his weapon and waves to them to go back down the mountain. The women know there are other watchers in the trees.

"I'm Arasely, and this is Lalekshany," she calls out. "Nisibis I think you know. We're from the Women's Brigade." The boy does not speak. "I'm going to take off my pack now." Arasely waits a moment, then unslings her own weapon and shrugs out of the heavy pack. Lalekshany and Nisibis follow suit, slowly, so as not to alarm their hosts. They pile batteries, soap, flour, tea, cooking oil, and a big bag of dried tomatoes on a folded plastic tarp.

"Thought maybe you could use these. May we come back next week?" They shoulder their weapons and turn away before they get a No.

As they slog and slide downhill through the snow, Lalekshany remarks, "A lot of work to get turned down."

Arasely shakes her head. "We're not done yet. Think what happened to make them abandon their homes, and what it will take to bring them back."

Nisibis adds, "Anyway, we want to talk to Jaafar, or his wife. If Jaafar were there, they wouldn't have put the boy out front. We have to go back."

The girl complains, "My knees hurt just thinking about it."

"Ha!" is all Arasely will say. She's got twenty years on Lalekshany, and feels every one of them.

● Testify

A sleepy-looking teen sits on the edge of a messy bed, talking into the screen. A set of headphones clasp his neck. Behind him pages torn from pop music magazines curl and rustle on the wall. In one corner the boy has painted the purple silhouette of a figure prancing with a guitar. It's not very good.

Someone asks, "Why did you join the Crusade?"

"The atheists are trying to take our women," Milenko recites. "Poison their minds. I want to protect them. Is that right?" He looks to one side.

"Good, Milenko. And tell us, were you afraid when you joined us?"

"I was afraid, but now I'm not. The fellows in my unit, they are a great bunch of guys."

"But it's dangerous, the work you do."

"Jesus sacrificed his only Son to redeem us. So I don't mind doing my part. I know Jesus loves me." Satisfied, Milenko slides on the headphones, but takes them off again when he sees something off-camera.

"Yes," he says. "All my friends have joined. We want to save the women."

Archbishop Eddie's smiling face blots out the boy's. "And that was Milenko N.," he says, "a boy from Chernu Mos. An ordinary lad like a thousand others, until he took up the Cross." The camera zooms out, so that we see that Eddie stands in Djemdjad Cathedral, before the great altar. He gestures to the broken body of Jesus crucified above. "Now this young man is a soldier for our true Lord who gave his life to save us. Think of it! Almighty God chose Milenko and lifted him up above aaaaall others" —here Eddies lifts his arms— "to do battle with Satan and all the forces of perversion, abortion and disbelief. Every day he pushes back the Satanic power. And no matter what happens, Milenko is guaranteed a place in heaven for ever and ever. Won't you join Milenko to fight for the Kingdom?"

Eddie has collected about twelve hundred of these video testimonies. When in the course of a Kingdom action a Crusader gets discorporated, Eddie sends the vid to the boy's parents. He finds they are great fundraising tools, and good for recruiting younger brothers, too.

• Books, guns

Next time they head up the mountain, Arasely and Lalekshany hike under a frothy sky that sucks and squalls like a ragged chest wound. When they reach the little settlement, they find Jaafar standing, hands on his hips, outside a sagging, snowcovered shack of wood planks and plastic sheets. He has piercing eyes and a dense, curly beard. Not yet thirty, already he has taken on the dignity of a patriarch. Less so the social graces.

"What do you want?"

A young woman comes out and elbows him aside. "Don't mind him. He has to huff and puff a bit first. I'm Khalifat. Please come join us."

The visitors have to stoop to get in the door, and stand a moment stamping their feet. The main room is crammed with clothes and boxes and blankets piled haphazardly too near a tiny wood stove. Half a dozen children and adults sit on worn carpets, while more crowd an inside doorway, holding aside the blanket that hangs there. They gawk at the newcomers and giggle softly, hands over their mouths.

"Glad to be such a source of merriment," Lalekshany mutters.

Arasely counts three young men, an old man, six women and almost as many children. She doesn't ask how many more are out foraging in the woods. At least one of the women is pregnant. Everyone wears coats and headgear. The place stinks of smoke and wet boots. The plastic sheets on the wall rattle and billow with each gust of wind.

Khalifat makes Jaafar sit with with her and beckons the visitors. A bright-eyed, bare-ass little boy nestles in Jaafar's lap.

The women from the Brigade shrug off their packs and join the circle. Khalifat opens a tea chest carved like a palace and scoops dark leaves into stained cups. The woman by her side pours hot water from the stove and passes around the cups. Arasely digs in a pocket and comes up with a tin of sugar, for which Khalifat supplies a tiny spoon.

When strangers meet they start with an exhaustive exploration of people they might know in common. Meeyadz is far from Echmash, so this process takes a while. Eventually they remember or invent a great grandmother who migrated from Echmash to Meeyadz in the 1910s. Thus they must be blood kin; in Rudeny there's even a word for this precise relationship. It's not impossible.

Arasely unzips her pack. This time she and Lalekshany have brought flashlights, batteries, rice, beans and books. Arasely picks one out.

"Do you read?"

"Of course."

"I'm learning to read myself. I like this one. It's about an explorer who finds a baby dinosaur and takes it home with her. I find snowy days a good time to practice."

"Dinosaurs?" Jaafar takes the book and pages through it. It has a lot of color pictures, and the little boy puts his pudgy fist on them, making Jaafar read the captions.

"We find the girls like reading, too. Maybe you could teach them."

"Our girls know how to read. We value all our children."

Movement in the doorway, and Khalifat gestures. A scrawny girl settles next to Lalekshany and paws through the books, retrieving one about the pop star Haleesa Sladek Seerchay. She looks to be about twelve, but with such hungry people it's hard to estimate. She reads page one aloud, then passes it to Lalekshany. That's how they share the wealth in this family. Lalekshany can barely read herself but makes up what she can't sound out, following the pictures. After three pages they set the book aside and compare decorative wrist bands. Lalekshany comes from a different province, and doesn't catch everything said in this country dialect. Soon, though, the girls are chattering like sisters, while Arasely and Jaafar negotiate.

Jaafar waves a hand over the gifts and repeats his question. "What do you want from us?"

The Council has thought this through. How can they bring men into the Brigade without undermining the new members' status with the other men? Dealing with Muslims is doubly tricky: they don't want to alienate the Christians at the same time. Most immediately, how can the women engage the men in a provisional way, to test their loyalty and willingness to learn? Her comrades told Arasely to start small.

"In truth, we need your help," she says. "We've got a lot of guns, some we've never used before. And we're bringing in a lot of new people. Maybe you can help us learn to use these weapons effectively. That is, if you know how."

Jaafar looks over to his wife, then points to the Ormuz strapped over Arasely's shoulder. Arasely hands it over. She chose this one in particular because it's a new model (according to Bryony, anyway, who charged too much for it). As he explains what he likes and doesn't like about this weapon, what it's good for and what to watch out for, Jaafar strips it, examines each part, and puts it back together.

Khalifat puts a hand on her husband's arm. "You see? He's very good, any type of gun."

"I see that."

Khalifat continues, "We want our homes back. The Dildos took them."

Another woman adds, "They burned our house."

Arasely nods. "Samir's I think is OK. For some reason the man who took it had to leave in a hurry." Arasely turns palms up in wonder: What could account for such behavior? One of the watchers in the doorway elbows another— they have heard this, too. Arasely continues, "Fortunately, we were able to recover the land records from before the Crusade. A lot of people lost their homes, not just you, so we have been collecting building materials. We've got bricks and block and sheets of tin, and we hope to get more soon. When you are ready, please come back and rebuild." The little kids look at their parents, who try to keep a poker face.

"Something else," says Khalifat. When country people get into bargaining mode, they keep going. "We want the children to go to school."

"We'd like that. We're trying to get the school going again. Maybe you could help teach."

Arasely strokes the beautiful tea chest. "In turn, I have to tell you something very earnestly. I mean you especially, Jaafar, and your brothers. You have to treat Brigade members with respect. Maybe you know more about guns. That's what we want you to teach us. We know things, too. Maybe you can learn from us. What do you think?"

Jaafar meets the eyes of his brothers, and grins at the women from the Brigade. "You kill Crusaders. We can help with that."

Arasely looks over to Khalifat, who lowers her eyes and shakes her head with a little smirk, as if to say, "What are you going to do? That's the way he is."

Last thing: "Do you have comms?" They do. "Then let me give you my number."

Arasely stands and takes up her pack. Lalekshany stands up too. Arasely holds out her hand. Jaafar takes it, his eyes on hers. Then she and Lalekshany shake hands with the other men and women.

On the way home, Arasely asks the younger woman, "How many did you count?" Their estimates of people, bedrolls and weapons dovetail closely. Arasely asks too about the girl Lalekshany talked with.

"Nayeda. She's my age. You wouldn't believe the adventures she's had. She promised to show me how she does her hair that way."

It takes a while to coax the clan down from the mountain. They make several visits first. Jaafar's brother Nuredin checks out the old home place, now a tumble of charred debris. The walls still stand, though, and Nisibis tells him who has extra roofing. The Brigade has started a revolving loan fund for business supplies and home repairs, and adds money now, so Jaafar's family won't have to wait too long. In the meantime they stay with Samir, whose house the Crusaders did not trash too badly.

• Installation

The Council won't let Zimara go back to Hidris because with the scar she is too easily recognized. Instead they send Yesenya's sister Filipa to keep in touch with the girl while they try to figure a way to get her out. While she's there Filipa makes it a point to meet the other Skylanders, whom Yesenya insists on bringing along, and some of the other women in the barracks as well. They may be of crucial assistance when it comes time for the girls to escape.

Yesenya can help, too. Soon after a chat over the fence with her sister, Yesenya returns to the baths with her cleaning cart. She goes first thing in the morning, before the water's hot, when no one's there. Then, with Kut's technician coaching over the comm, Yesenya swaps out the device under the big wall screen. She has to hurry— Lyerka or Sevik could walk in at any time.

And when she's done, it doesn't work— not for Kut, not for Sevik. Pissed off, the Doctor goes to take a look. He checks all the cables to and from the baths, yanking on them to be sure they're set right. That does the trick. The network is back online. Sevik doesn't even notice the new trafficker. Takes him months to suspect that someone in Saray is looking over his shoulder, and then he can't figure out how.

Something the watchers learn right away: the name of the Belgian officer who sold NATO stealth codes to Clean Sparkling water corporation. That guy goes on an inspection tour of robot radar stations in Svalbard while investigators try to figure out what else he's been up to. A cybersecurity team heads to Saray to reprogram the scramblers on the NATO warplanes.

• New Recruit

One day Nayeda seeks out Arasely at the Brigade office. "I want to join you."

"You want to help us, or you want to join us?"

"I want to join the Brigade."

"Applicants have got to be eighteen. We do have a girls' program."

"I'm eighteen. I'm ready." Nayeda hands over the card she got when her family had to register under the old Resident Aliens law-- no matter that the family had been here since the 1300s.

Arasely looks it over and hands it back. "What do your brothers say?"

Nayeda is taken aback by the question. "It's my choice, yes?"

"Yes. You have to tell them, though."

"Why can't I just come here and join you?"

"We may have to fight. We don't want women who are afraid to tell their own families."

Next time he's in town, Jaafar goes straight to the office of the Women's Collective. Arasely is not there, but Zimara is. She introduces herself. She tells him she heard about Nayeda's application.

"I'm sure she has talked to you. What do you think?"

"I don't like it." He tilts his head to one side, as if easing a pain in the neck. He says, "She's of age. She can do what she likes."

"You have a decision, too— whether she has your blessing, or has to leave your family."

He tells her, "You may know, among mountain people we have a tradition of women taking up arms in times of danger. Christians sing of Miryam. We have Yasna Khattab and Leyla Resh. These are historical figures."

"I've heard the Yasna story. An astonishing woman. What I don't like, they made her an honorary man. She couldn't have sex, she couldn't have kids. They set her apart from all the other women. Here the women of the Brigade are women, not fake men, and we stick together."

"I see." He digs a thumb into his belt. "Then Nayeda will be in good hands. So— my blessing." He makes as if to go, but Zimara holds up a hand.

"Something else, Jaafar. We are opening the Brigade to men, too. And we want you and your brothers to join."

Jaafar's eyebrows climb to his hairline. "Forgive me if I say, that seems very unlikely."

"They tell me you fight very well. For me the question is, can you work with women? Could you take orders from women?"

"Orders." He pulls the tip of his mustache. "My brothers, not yet. Me, yes. If they're not stupid."

"So?"

"Let's see how Nayeda does."

• Motivational Speaker

Last year Dorgu, Diagonal of Djemdjad, built a new conference center in the woods just down the road from Rudomil Monastery. Dorgu planned to use the place for prayer retreats, meetings of the hierarchy, and hunting. Mountain ibex are disappearing fast, and the Diagonal is determined to get him one before they are all gone.

More to the point, the center's soaring steel and glass skyline, satellite dishes, flower gardens and ripple screens are all meant to mark Dorgu's bid as the cooler, warmer, more charismatic alternative to dour Abbot Snat's vision of Christianity as penance. Snat's gone now, though, and Dorgu faces more formidable competition. Imagine his dismay when the Kulkhiz generals make him hand over his rustic palace to Brother Michael.

"You'll get it back after the war," Judge Hokh assures him.

"Sure. After a horde of filthy soldiers use it as their toilet."

"Our brave boys? Think of it this way, then. Would you prefer the Crusaders open shop in Djemdjad?"

The Diagonal would not. He has already lost a lucrative Sunday service to his uninvited guest, Archbishop Eddie. He bewails the injustice but Hokh knows he will do what he's told; that's why they gave him the cathedral in the first place.

Dorgu's loss is Michael Modrek's gain. The Crusader commander loves the clean lines and mountain views, the dazzling waterwall (courtesy of Clear Sparkling megacorp), the gleaming kitchen, the high end comm. And when he's ready to introduce the Crusade to the local gentry, this is where he invites them.

An invitation they can hardly refuse: church lay leaders, landowners, businessmen and gangsters in the newly conquered territories, plus assorted counterparts from Kulkhiz just to show their solidarity, and to grab their share of loot and war contracts. The warlord aims to show them they have willy-nilly joined the winning side, and that their best bet is to Submit to the Lord.

So there he is in his kung fu black jammies when the buses pull into the parking lot at the Untouched Virgin Spiritual Life Center, snow powdered prettily. The noxious wheezing machines disgorge clouds of smoke and two score sleepy staggering passengers, a bit rumpled in their Sunday bumpkin best, clutching creased and crushed overnight bags. Puffing frosty plumes, they stretch and stamp to restore feeling to frozen limbs.

They are not sure what to expect. They walk the gauntlet between rows of expressionless crewcut young Crusaders, decked out in white tunics and gold braid. These Archangels serve as Michael's bodyguard, and, in the meaty hands of Sergeant Major Greb, they have many other applications as well.

Michael greets his guests with a grin and open arms, embracing them one by one. For a moment they are helpless in his grip, cheek pressed to sweaty cheek, the faint odor of lilac wafting from the

Crusader's face perfume. As the visitors await release, their eyes drift to the banner hung above the center's entrance: Jesus on a garden bench, golden locks cascading down his wrestler's shoulders and a book of scripture in his lap, surrounded by children cross-legged on the grass. One boy, half rising, offers a flower to Jesus, who reaches out to take it. A dozen women worked weeks to stitch this banner in Hidris. And beneath the image, a sinister poem in pink curlicue:

I love the little Jesus
who comes to play with me
When I grow up if I don't sin
He'll take me blissfully.

"Do you like it?" Michael asks more than one visitor. "I wrote that myself." He simpers and casts down his eyes. O yes! Our prophet-general is a poet as well. He has a special fondness for children, them being future leaders and all.

And behold! Who could that be, perched on the stone wall at the edge of the terrace, right hand caressing a hymnal, left raised in half a prayer, with a dozen teen Crusaders arrayed in the snow around him? Why, it's the Apostle Sevik, teaching these rough youth the sacred songs of our fathers. Konsta rolls his eyes and wiggles frozen toes. He wishes the travelers would hurry on by, so Sevik will call it quits and they can all go inside where it's warm.

From somewhere beyond the Center, screams and explosions— more Crusader boys at their training exercises. They will provide the sound track for the day.

One of the newcomers, just stumbling off the bus, flinches when he sees Michael Modrek. Michael doesn't recognize the man, but he has seen this reaction before. "Come, brother, I won't hurt you." And just to prove it he holds his guest in tight embrace, not quite smothering him. The warrior chief straightens the man's tie before he lets him go.

Greb's men shepherd the visitors inside to the screening room, where they search the newcomers and their gear, none too tenderly. The soldiers confiscate all electronics before showing the guests to their rooms. Returning to the main hall, today's participants line up at the registration tables to pick up screenpads and name holos, then file into the big assembly room. Each seat sports a cushion handstitched with a famous name from the Bible: Amalek, Amorites, Bashan, Canaan, Debir, Eglon . . . Zamzummims, Zephath . . . enemies laid waste by Our Lord and his faithful servants. Pink and green flowers curl around each hallowed name; seems almost a shame to sit on them. The visitors rise when Michael takes the stage.

"My brothers in Christ! Welcome to the Crusade! Today we are going to hear and offer some powerful testimony. Let us pray!" All bow their heads, even Greb's killers lining the wall and doorways. "Heavenly Father, thank You for choosing us to carry out Your work. We are but broken, empty vessels; make us whole! Infuse us with Your divine will! You have promised to vanquish our enemies. 'Fear him not!' the good Book tells us, 'For I have delivered him into your hand, and all his people, and his land!' This is a filthy world, Father, and You demand of us to wash it clean."

"Will of God!" his congregants recite.

The Crusader paces back and forth while the wall screens project colossally his every move. "Now, if you will take up your screenpads. Let's look at today's agenda." Michael gives them the code to access the display, and reviews the instructions for the day. Then they break into small groups to meet their district captains.

Michael has diced up the conquered territory and assigned a boss to each nugget; for instance, Hayk devours Marm and Obeyyed, while Vokno slurps up Eskedneedzh. The visitors dutifully gather round their district captains.

The first task is to complete on the screenpads the survey Sevik has devised. The usual contact information, of course, but it's very comprehensive: Sevik wants the names of everyone in the household, including servants, and everyone in the extended family, plus employers and employees.

This is a good way to identify village networks, alliances, and feuding factions. Any dissent in the ranks, it should be easy to identify supporters and opponents, and to visit collective punishment upon the troublemaker's friends and family.

The longer section asks who owns what: cash, jewelry, real estate, vehicles, tools . . . it's quite detailed. The Crusaders will tax any items listed. But they don't mind if people lie, because then they'll confiscate any property not registered.

Back in the kitchen, Brother Michael stands at a counter chewing on celery sticks as he looks at the figures on his own screen. "How about this one? He's got a couple dump trucks."

Sevik takes the pad. "Unlicensed quarrier, most likely. Yes, see here?" The women preparing lunch bustle about. Michael stops one to sample the kebab she carries.

"More cinnamon!" he orders. Turning to his security chief, he remarks, "Perfect. He'll lend them for the waste hauling fleet. The Saray government seized two of our trucks last week — "

"Fingered no doubt by the Dvelkoi. They don't like the competition."

"Another reason to settle accounts with Commander Gloria sooner rather than later. In the meantime . . . ."

The partners discuss candidates for their special contributors list, and give the names to Flem, who sits at a table, a bowl of sheep-eyes soup in one big hand, the other tapping at his own pad. As he slurps, oily soup runs down his beard. Before the day is out, Flem will summon each of these wealthy men for a chat.

Back in the main hall, participants lay down their screenpads and sit in circles to share their feelings. Today's question: How can I help the Crusade? In each group officers record the answers and display them instantly on the wall screens. (Some of the captains can't read or key, but the voice recognition software does it for them.) Amazingly, each group comes up with the same list: today's honorees will pay taxes, contribute sons to combat, kill apostates, report on Saray government troop movements, smuggle money and weapons, and pray daily for victory. Even if these men should be tempted one day to defect to the democrats, they are condemned here by their own words. Never one for subtlety, Sevik sweeps in and shows them how to key into the form he has prepared, by which each man swears to God to keep these commitments, and presses his thumb to the sensor bar. In the months to come, the captains will call each man to account for his promises.

But it's not all fire and brimstone. The Lord knows how to take care of his Chosen. In the next session, Multiply Your Blessings, Brother Michael has his bagman Tadibassi explain to the assembled how, in addition to eternal bliss, they can also sign up for contracts to supply the Crusade and its affiliated enterprises, franchises in the conquered towns, partnerships with Hidris exporters, or positions as managers of newly stolen properties. Thus a man who denounced his neighbor last week might today get the job of running the infidel's plumbing supply store. Just a few forms to fill out. The guests rub their palms and start typing. They think, Now we're getting somewhere.

(Behind the scenes, the captains grumble. Used to be, they simply chose whichever contractor promised the biggest kickback; now, it seems, Tadibassi is trying to horn in on their perqs. They make plans to disappear him soon.)

This session concludes with another uplifting small group discussion. What does spiritual warfare mean to you? Participants share their innermost hopes and fears, their struggles, triumphs and disappointments. They laugh and cry and pray together. It helps to know they have a friend in Jesus, and another in Brother Michael.

• Winter Games

Break time. The group splits up. The larger group heads outside to watch the Crusaders at their drills. The forest around the center has been bulldozed to make way for training fields and tin-roofed barracks

for the overflow from Rudomil Monastery. Crusader flags festoon the muddy fields: two crossed swords on a white background, the horizontal one with a single gleaming red drop at the tip, and another falling. "Not peace, but a sword," Jesus tells us, and by God He means it. Young men run around waving guns, tossing grenades, stabbing bags of hay as if fucking their mothers. Look how that one blows up a truck! And this one with the bayonet! The visitors politely clap at each lunge. Such skill and panache! Such spirit!

The highlight of the morning is the display of hand to hand combat. Pairs of soldiers grapple shirtless on a platform below the reviewing stand. Meaty muscles grope and pound, spraying beads of sweat and blood. After six rounds one man stands alone, a two meter tyrannosaur named Berezan. Who dares challenge this fighting machine?

"Brother Michael!" Greb calls out. The Archangels pick up the chant. "Brother Michael!"

Modestly the Crusader boss waves his hand to decline. No, the boys are having fun, he doesn't want to intrude. Finally Michael submits to popular demand. He strips off jacket and shirt so Greb can work on his shoulders, to loosen him up. Berezan glares disdainfully at the crowd, knowing what comes next.

The young commander leaps to the platform. For a moment he dances around, bouncing on his toes. He wears ankle boots with steel toes and hooks for the laces. Seeing such an intimidating foe, the mobile mountain drops his hands to his sides. "Hai!"cries Michael, unleashing a fusillade of punches that turn the giant's face to mush. "Ho!" yells Michael, launching a kick that nearly tears off his opponent's left ear. The champion staggers but keeps to his feet, until Michael, spinning, sweeps low to slash at the back of his knees. Dutifully the big man topples in sections, like a tower folding in a quake.

The onlookers clap and cheer, to keep warm, and as a precaution. Michael circles the platform, arms spread, while Sergeant Major Greb drapes a flag over his shoulders. The vanquished fighter sits up, rocking slightly, hands to the sides of his pulped head. Ever magnanimous in victory, Michael leans down and offers his hand. Berezan pretends not to see it, and struggles to his feet. Michael grabs Berezan's right hand in his own left, and raises both. "Brothers! When such men fight with God at their side, who can withstand their power?" Berezan, with God at his side, looks ecstatic; but then, given the condition of his face, it's a little hard to tell.

Meanwhile a second group boards a bus for the short trip up the mountainside. For the Crusaders, one of the Virgin center's main attractions is the abandoned mine nearby at Tyvrdav. Where once monks dug by hand for copper, now prisoners languish in the cold and dark. These are mostly hostages taken in raids. Doctor Sevik calls this the meat locker. Now Sevik's star student Flem leads the tourists to the heavy barred gate, and shines a spotlight into the gloom.

"Can't they dig out the other side?" someone asks.

"Sure, if they have gills and a shovel," Flem says. "Mine's flooded, all but this top section here."

"Hard to see," complains one of the sightseers, a fat dentist from Drevnitsa, peering through the bars.

Flem summons one of the guards, who carries a sack of garbage, leftovers from the tables at Untouched Virgin. "Watch this," Flem directs, and pulls out a scrap of bread, reaches through the bars and tosses it into the mine entrance. They hear some scrapings. A pale scrawny figure emerges wrapped in layers of torn shirts. He steps daintily, as if across broken glass; he hasn't been taking his vitamins, and struggles to maintain coordination. Staying out of Flem's reach he picks up the bread and tucks it in a loose dirty sleeve. He gestures, wanting more.

"What's this?" Flem demands. "They used to fight each other."

"It's the new captives from the refugee camp," the guard explains. "Now they send one person to gather the food, and they share it."

"Yes? We'll see about that!" Flem upends the sack, spilling the garbage just outside the gate. "We're too nice to them. No more food today and tomorrow, understood? See how polite they are then!"

The rag man inside stares a moment at the silhouettes beyond the bars, as if at caged animals, then retreats silently into the depths of the mine.

The guard shrugs. When Sevik hears of it, he will countermand the order. They've not gone to all the trouble of capturing these people for Flem's entertainment. They hope to make good money from the families. This is business. Starving the prisoners is OK to a point, but who will pay them if the captives die?

In his pique, Flem forgets to remind his audience of the main point of this excursion: rebates of ten percent of the ransom to anyone who cares to finger a rich relative or neighbor. Nice thing about the Crusade, everyone can contribute.

● Do Your Part

Jaafar and his brothers do a good job with weapons training. Zimara wants them to join the Brigade, but not just yet. She needs Christian men to join first. She's had her eyes on one family in particular.

Arax has joined Kavkaz's new council and her partner Valenty attends every meeting. He is big and boisterous. At first he cheers her every word, until her sharp look sets him quiet back in his seat. One morning as they leave the meeting Zimara slides an arm inside Arax'.

"I so much appreciate your work, Arax. The Council is shaping up quite well, don't you think?" They talk a bit about next week's session. Zimara turns to Arax' husband. "What about you, Valenty? Have you thought about joining the Brigade? We're bringing men in now, you know."

Valenty had not thought about it, not for a second. "Not for me, Zimara."

"Why not?" asks Arax.

He laughs an uncertain laugh. "Me? Come on." She's not coming, so he adds, "I mean, get serious."

Once they get home Arax lays into him. "What's wrong with you? These Muslim men help us."

"Jaafar's OK. But I don't take orders from women."

"I see." The north winds howl.

"You know what I mean."

"I saw you crawling around for Borko, you and your buddies. So you'll get on your knees for the Dildos but you won't stand with good women?"

"That's not fair! And I didn't crawl."

"Are you part of this family? Then do your part."

● Rahday Gets the Message

The tourists are hungry by the time they get back to the Untouched Virgin Spiritual Life Center. Their gracious host wants this gathering to be just perfect, so he's had grab units scouring the countryside for delicacies, comestibles, viands and victuals. Mostly they've brought back truckloads of shriveled potatos and winter-scrawny sheep and cattle; some of today's visitors passed them on the road this very morning, and recognized the stock seized from their neighbors.

The kitchen women have done their best to prettify these measly gleanings, and now in the assembly hall huge trays slither and spill glistening slabs of meat and sauce onto tablecloths and the floor, amid billows of steam from craters of coffee and hot clove brandy at each end of the tables. The distinguished guests elbow each other to the carnage, plates in fist and forks flashing: grocers and bespectacled pharmacists as intent and ruthless as any jihadi raiding a sleeping village.

A dither by the doorway as Abbot Torkim enters with some burly monks; wisely he steps around the scrum. Gloria Dvelko follows, Archbishop Eddie's spy, in a sexy new uniform. Brother Michael watches her work the room, schmoozing the gentry like it's her party. She casts no glance his way.

A few announcements whilst they gorge. From the dais Abbot Torkim welcomes the visitors to Untouched Virgin, and urges them not to go home before they have sampled the delights of Rudomil Monastery just up the road. "We've got some new shrines and memorabilia, and don't forget this year's festival coming up. You will find spiritual power for the whole family!" He sends the monks around with half-off coupons.

Father Semarem steps up. Many here know him from his radio show, the Love Shepherd. "And leave us not forget our beautiful girl-children," he counsels, and explains how his match service operates. "We have thousands of families with respectful, hardworking, God-fearing girls. We'll introduce you and counsel you through every step of the way"— online shopping, dowry negotiations, payment guarantees, vaginal inspections, all the little details of Godly romance.

Then Sevik takes the mike, to narrate the year's accomplishments. Wall screens flicker behind him as he talks, highlights from the team scrapbook, one might say: shattered spans of the bridge at Chernu Mos; the smoking remains of a school in Bejad; a long line of Muslim women and children, clutching satchels, crossing a frozen river at the frontier; the blasted, billowing center of Obeyyed the morning after the Crusader conquest. Thoughtfully Sevik has assigned captains and archangels to sit at each table as a kind of cheering section.

"I was there!" they yell at each new triumph. "We gave 'm a hot time, o boy!" They pound the tables, scattering food and dishware. "Guess they learned their lesson. Guess they won't play *that* game again!" Bellies full, the civilians are in a better mood, and soon join in the fun.

Brother Michael sits at a table on the dais with Sergeant Major Greb. In front of him, a cup of water: unlike lesser mortals, he is not subject to desire. Michael waits till the diners line up for dessert to commence part two. He watches them carefully.

"And now, my brothers, some sad news," Brother Michael announces. The big screens flash a new image: an emerald isle in a sapphire sea. The camera zooms in. A sprawling villa crowns a rugged cliff. Closer . . . a beautiful home, ringed by fountains and fruit trees. But something's amiss. Michael's guests scoop up boiled milk and goat brains, twirled with honey cinnamon, and waddle back to their tables. What's this?

The camera pans back to an ornate iron gate, torn and twisted. Now up the steps and past the gaping hole where a massive door used to be. Inside, stunning art and sculpture in the sunny rooms, massive dark furniture, glittering electronics of every sort, glorious rugs, bodies heaped at the bottom of a stairway . . . another door broken in, a bed and clothes in disarray, on the floor two bare feet tangled in a bloody sheet. Zoom out, move backward, until the camera is just outside the front gate again: a plaque with curlicue letters, welcoming you to the home of the Sikert family.

"Yes," Michael explains, "it's General Sikert, former head of Rudeny government, former head of Rudeny armed forces, dispatched last night by unknown intruders. Tragic, no? But in a way predictable." Michael stands up, barely able to contain himself, and paces the stage.

"His officers begged him long ago. You have all the business. Let us be partners. Share with us, General, a few crumbs from your table. Your faithful soldiers who make all this possible. Give us a taste. Ease our poverty. Wet our lips only.

"Did he listen? No! He forgot us. He forgot where he came from. He demanded our obedience, but forgot his to God." He waves at the screen.

"And when the faithless rebelled, those sniggering schoolteachers and feminized professors, it was Sikert's word that held us back in battle, and let the rabble take the streets. Captain Djerenk, Captain Supek, fifteen days they fought, selling their own lives dear, every warrior cutting down ten terrorists. You were there. You remember. We smashed those sick perverts. We ground their faces into the asphalt. We draped their guts on powerlines. My brave brothers!

"But the generals lost their nerve. They lost their honor.

"They'd gotten too soft. Their French silver. Their haji whores. Their vacations with movie stars. They turned from the One True Faith. They listened to women and faithless Westernizers. They forgot how to fight. They betrayed us! And this proud General Sikert, this Judas, signed the Transition Accords."

Michael points an accusing finger to the west, toward Rudeny. "We see the filth he left behind. Brave soldiers cast aside. Jews walking the streets of our capital. Bookstores selling the Koran and foreign magazines. Romance novels! NATO armor patrolling the streets! Can you believe? They hire women to teach at the university. They pay women to teach our sons!" His voice rises to a kind of strangled squeak. The holy warrior pauses a minute, gestures to the screen and the two lonely feet lolling by the bed.

"Tell me General. What will you do now with your thirty pieces of silver?"

Michael smirks. He is so clever. Like a dog dragging the neighbor cat to your doorstep, well chewed, Brother Michael expects mighty praise. He doesn't hear it.

The civilians clap politely. They have heard of Sikert, of course. One general more or less, makes no nothing to them. The Crusader officers, though, sit in silence, stunned by this act of parricide. Many served with Sikert. Does Michael aim to overturn the whole world?

Furious, their leader grabs a screenpad and jabs at it till he finds what he wants. He takes a deep breath. "You know the story of Ehud? Sure you do. 'The Lord raised them up a deliverer, Ehud, and by him they sent a present to the king of Moab. And Ehud came to the king and said, I bring a message to you from God. The king stood up, and Ehud took a dagger and stuck him in the belly up to the hilt, and rolls of fat closed on the blade, so that Ehud couldn't pull it out; but the dirt poured out of the king.' The shit poured out!"

The fat men in front rub their bellies meditatively. Across the room Sevik is making some kind of signal with his hands, but our new Deliverer doesn't see it. Once again it's up to Greb, who stands up and cheers. So at last do the diners. Captains Rahday and Vokno lean toward each other in intense conversation, clapping as they talk. Face flushed, for a moment Michael doesn't know how to respond.

"Traitors!" he shouts. The civilians shift restlessly, not sure what's gone wrong, and redouble their applause.

Abruptly Michael shifts gears. "But enough of mourning!" He snaps his fingers."Brother Greb! Bring us our heroes!"

Today's honorees are four of Greb's Archangels, standing there by the door. "That's right, the whole squad," Michael beckons. The four walk through the audience to the dais. The Crusader general embraces each in turn, and kisses them on the cheek, and watches the captains watch him. He summons an aide to bring an exquisite old lacquered box —there used to be one just like it at the monastery— and picks out of it sprayed-ivory hilt mail order daggers from the monks' workshops. And there's a medal for squad leader Dario. "Take these men as your exemplars," Michael exhorts.

Regaining their composure, the spectators clap and cheer, bang their bottles on the table. No one needs to specify what meritorious service these heroes have rendered.

One arm still draped over Dario's shoulder, Michael scans the crowd. Now he knows what to do. "You seem uneasy, Brother Rahday," he calls out.

"Me?" The captain scrambles to his feet and snaps a crisp salute. "I'm proud, Brother. Proud of our work for the Lord."

"You didn't look so pleased a moment ago, watching the fate of that traitor. Perhaps you feel embarrassed. I can understand that. After all, there have been so many accusations against the men in your unit. They mistreat the townspeople. They rob them, or take their children. Yes, I've heard that. And they double-tax the faithful, One Trues like these men here. You know this is strictly forbidden.

"And these thieves, do they share their wealth with the Crusade?" he appeals to the crowd. "No! Everything for themselves. Nothing for God. They steal from God! What do you say, Captain? Do you think this is right?"

"Very serious, Brother. Thank you for bringing it to my attention. I will investigate right away!"

"I want you to bring your men a message," Michael says. He flutters his hand at Greb. "Paper!" he demands. No one has any paper. Greb rips a yellow print-out off the wall. It says "W.C.", with an arrow. It's blank on the other side. Another Crusader offers Michael his pen. Michael scribbles a moment, then waves the sheet high.

"This is my pledge to you. Anyone who registers with us is our beloved, true servants of the faith. We extend to them the peace of the Lord. No soldier, no captain may impose on them extra burdens without our authorization. 'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!' Do you understand?" He looks around the room. He knows the captains won't like this at all. "Should anyone violate this promise, I want to hear about it."

The officers receive this news with stony silence. Fuck them.

He hands the sheet to Dario, and nods. The soldier heads for Captain Rahday. Alarmed, Rahday rises. "I'll make sure they get the message, Brother!" he shouts.

"We know you will," Michael replies. Dario slaps the sheet against Rahday's chest and punches through it with his new dagger. The blade buckles as it parts Rahday's ribs— what did the monks use to make it, tin? The Captain jerks back, left hand groping for the chair, and eases into it, grimacing as if with gas pains. He reaches for the dagger, thinks better of it, instead grasps the edge of the table. His eyes are wide open, but he's not looking at anything. Instead he concentrates on the novel sensations in his chest. He raises his hand once again, finger out as if about to make an important point; then his hand falls and his head lolls back. Rahday's body shifts sideways as he slumps. The hilt of the knife catches against the edge of the table and keeps the corpse from sliding to the floor. Now how are they going to read Michael's decree?

Thus edified and entertained, the conference-goers are ready for the highest honor: their induction into the Order of the Untouched Virgin. They don surplices, hoist banners and file outside, where Sevik's boys' choir leads them around the conference center seven times, like Joshua at Jericho. For a few moments the boys' clear voices trill against the mountainside, unutterably beautiful. Then Sevik requires the guests to join in. As these ancient hymns have not been heard for decades, the devotees are at a loss until Sevik tells them where to find the words on their screenpads. When they are thoroughly cold and muddy, Sevik leads them to the outdoor platform, scene of Brother Michael's earlier triumph. Abbot Torkim blesses them and distributes Untouched Virgin gift bags stuffed with Jesus holos, Rudomil souvenirs, uplifting prayer leafs from Archbishop Eddie's studio, and boxes of expired meds from the Hidris pirate factories.

One little scene catches Sevik's jealous eye. He nudges Brother Michael. "Now there's an ugly sight." Across the way, Commander Gloria and Sergeant Major Greb seem to be in fervent consultation.

"Beauty and the beast."

Sevik slips in the stiletto. "Odd. Gloria doesn't usually hang out with the help. I wonder what they're talking about?"

Brother Michael's demeanor darkens for a moment, then he shakes his head and laughs. "No worries, Doctor. Greb is an ape, but he's my ape. Utterly loyal. He knows he will never command. He wants to get into that— " he gestures at the lady warrior, "more power to him."

"Like you say, probably just flirting." Neither can imagine the Sergeant Major flirting.

Later, Michael asks Greb, "Quite a discussion you had with the Commander. All very satisfactory?"

The rough old soldier grunts. “Didn’t Doctor Sevik tell you? She has been angling to get a look at his treasure chamber. Could it be she and Eddie mistrust the Doctor? Of course Sevik refused. She thought I might be able to help her.”

Brother Michael taps fingers against his lips. “And will you?”

“I want her to help me, so to speak.”

“Get Sevik to give you a couple of the nicer artifacts. Let her bring those to Eddie. That should shut them up a while.”

“I want her wide open.”

“You’ll find her less tasty than she looks. But I’ll be curious to learn what you get for these baubles.”

One more task for the weary visitors. Wisely they insist on taking their district captains out for a night on Hidris town. A few will escape from there, and head back to Rudeny. Most will spend the night in brothels, their last pocket plucked. As their buses pull out from Untouched Virgin next morning, a truck from Hidris spills the women who will clean up the mess the visitors have left. Goranka’s crew are a little surprised to find a corpse in the conference hall, but only because it’s a captain. They drag him outside to chill out while they work. Upstairs, by a blazing fire, Michael and Doctor Sevik drink and compare notes.

● Men Too

When Arax’ husband shows up next day at Zimara’s office, a little sullen, she looks him up and down and says, “We are so pleased to have you apply to join the Brigade. You will start as one of the fighters. You’ll train with the rest of us. Will that be a problem? Good. Come by tomorrow then. Bring boots and lunch.

“And Valenty. Later on, if you can get fifteen fighters to vote for you, we’ll make you a small group prihvadj. Think about it. OK, see you tomorrow.”

That afternoon Zimara talks to Nisibis’ group. “Arax’ husband has come to join us. We are very happy, as with any new member. You will treat your brother the same as your sisters: you will help.”

The women are disposed already to treat this novelty with maternal care. If he expects them to be impressed by his martial skills, however, there is mutual disappointment. He spent a year in the army when he was twenty. Not since then has he had to run hours on mountain trails or crawl in the mud while buckshot sizzles overhead. “Poor dear,” says Arax, and suggests a way to soothe the pain.

On his day off Valenty puts on a brave front among the homeboys. Karel, for example, has a bunch of questions.

“How did you join? Do they pay you? What’s it like to work with all those women?”

Valenty adopts a small, knowing smile. “Come and see.”

It takes a month for him to recruit eleven men and four women. The day Zimara makes Valenty a small group leader, she also inducts Jaafar, and offers him the same deal. It takes Jaafar no time to enroll other Muslims, who have been ready for weeks. Zimara waits another month before making Jaafar a prihvadj as well.

Now they have to change the name of the Women’s Brigade. They toss around lots of clever titles, but there is no clear front runner. Zimara herself hates to give up their old name. For the time being, they’ll call themselves the Brigade.

Over the coming weeks Zimara transfers a few people in and out of the men’s units, ostensibly for training reasons, till each of the men’s units has several women, and men are dispersed among several groups. The men seem to like the ratio. They struggle, though, to figure how out how to relate to

women unaccompanied by brothers or husbands. Some of the women are more patient than others, and the men learn from both kinds. More men join.

● Prihvadj Damyana

About the same time, Damyana pushes again to be assigned a group.

"She's been a hard worker, faithful," Zimara tells the Council. "She did very well at Bosanski Bridge. I think she's ready."

Some of the Council members aren't so sure. "Taking orders well doesn't mean she'd be good at giving them."

Zimara asks Lemane, Damyana's prihvadj: "What do you think?"

"Damyana works hard. She does what she's supposed to do."

"Don't you think she's a little strange, Zimara? A little off?" Emiliye comments.

"And you're not? And I'm not? We've all got our problems. But everyone has potential. Everyone deserves a chance." Zimara sees the skeptical faces, and adds another point. "Look, we've got women joining us every day. This morning three sisters hiked up from Kavkaz. We're going to need to set up more units, and we'll need people to take responsibility for them. People with experience. Let's give Damyana a small group and see how she does."

Even so, Zimara sits down with Damyana before the next Council meeting. "You know being responsible for these women is different than taking care of Aloyzi and Gret. You can't just tell them what to do, right? You've got to listen. Think you can do that?"

"Of course. I understand, Zee. Everyone deserves respect. You taught me well."

"We're all different, Damyana. We surprise each other. That's a good thing, because we all have different strengths. So don't expect everyone to think the same way you do, or react the same."

"I understand. You'll see. I'll be a good leader."

Zimara hugs her. "I know you will."

Damyana brushes away a tear. "I'll miss spending time with your kids, though."

"Come by any time. They love you."

The new team's first job is to escort families returning from New Start camp; Damyana brings them all home safely, and makes sure the neighbors know the returnees have the Brigade's protection.

● Disappointed

Peshnits is a provincial capital and port far down the coast from Saray. The Crusaders have raided it twice, stealing what they could carry, burning the rest. Now it has been almost a year, time enough for folks there to have rebuilt; time to attack again. Brother Michael sends Captain Skhrote with field artillery, tanks and two hundred troops in trucks and APCs. They start out from Hidris just past midnight.

An hour past the border, Skhrote gets a call from the Kulkhiz Air Force. "Zion Four, we see a flock heading your way from Saray. Ten duckies in formation."

"Hmmm," Skhrote ponders. "Training exercise?" The Crusaders haven't seen NATO warcraft this far from the front lines for many months. Last time, NATO lost four planes, and six the time before that.

"Doesn't appear so. Will track. If they stay on course, you've got fifteen minutes."

How the hell does NATO know about this raid? Or was it simply some random surveillance drone that spotted them? No matter. His men can arm the anti-aircraft battery with plenty of time to spare.

Skhrote signals the convoy to slow and pull over at the edge of a field. They've got a flatbed with surface-to-air missiles in twelve launchers. While the rest of the Lord's army drop from their trucks to take a leak or have a smoke, a crew activates the guidance systems and links them to the tracking data they get from Kulkhiz. The NATO formation continues to approach. The tank gunners elevate their cannon as if to shoot down the planes. Skhrote climbs atop the lead tank for a better view.

The NATO machines show up at once on the scanner. The men of the missile crew are excited. They have been hoping for an opportunity like this for months. The crew chief taps at his console. "Locked on." Then the planes streak over the horizon, tiny sparks in the night sight. Captain Skhrote comms the order to launch. A satisfying burst of flame and smoke trails into the sky, incinerating the Crusader napping beneath the launch vehicle. Up and up. As the warplanes get closer, the rockets seem to twirl away and disappear into the clouds.

"What's going on?" Skhrote demands. Looking back, he sees the lieutenant bending over the scanner, slapping at keys. "They're diverting. They're veering off."

"No shit. Did you peg in the codes?"— that is, the codes Clear Sparkling stole and gave to Archbishop Nagahry. They allow the guidance systems to see through the electronic chaff broadcast by the NATO planes.

"I did. I'm sure I did."

"Do it again." Skhrote bites his lip and raises the binoculars again. The warplanes are just a minute away. Soldiers start running to their vehicles; some of the drivers pull back onto the road in a hurry. They are all trying to turn around at once, and get in each other's way. Soldiers on foot yell for the drivers to wait. Skhrote tumbles off his tank as it lurches into the field.

"What the?" Skhrote yells, but then he is deafened as the tank disintegrates a few meters away. Skhrote struggles to his feet, hands over his bleeding ears, trying to blink away whatever seems to be filming his one good eye. He doubles over, coughing black goo. He staggers through swirls of flame and strange metal tangles, lovely lacework stitched by a thousand steel needles. Half a man stumbles into Skhrote, knocking him down again. Nearby a fuel line bursts like an artery, spewing a pool of flaming gold. As he scrambles away from the blazing flood —or rather, flails against the ground, without seeming to move very far— as the superheated fumes boil the alveoli in his lungs, Skhrote wonders: What did NATO promise God to get Him on their side?

● Girls' Team

Meeyadz' men play futbol in the lumpy field by the church. There's a boys' team, too, and Zimara, Gret and Rekady come by to watch Aloyzi's first game. Gret cheers louder than her mom, until she catches herself and sits down abruptly, hand over her mouth.

"You like this," Zimara says. Gret nods, unable to suppress a smile. Zimara casts a glance at Rekady, who has the same idea.

Four days later Gret and Rekady return to the field with a bagful of new futbols and a few of Gret's friends. Rekady has played all his life. He sets them to work. Their moms show up the second day. Some won't wear shorts, and peel around the field in skirts. The men complain the second week.

"What? You have futbols."

"Not nice ones like these." So Rekady has to make another trip to the flatland, and returns with more futbols and brand new nets for the goals. A couple guys offer to help coach the girls.

Aloyzi taunts Gret, "You can never beat us."

Gret lifts her nose in the air. "You'll see."

● Sliver Lining

"Your codes don't work!" Brother Michael shouts into the comm. "What have you done with my army?"

"What are you talking about?" the Archbishop says. He's coming off a three-day food binge, Gloria's diet program tossed to the winds, and in no mood for Michael's whining.

"The air codes don't work. The penetrators you gave us. Skhrote's column is gone. All my lovely tanks." In fact, the Crusaders have lost only a small part of their force, but it's significant. They have never before lost an entire unit, with armor.

"They must have screwed up."

"We were listening. They used the codes, but they couldn't hit the planes. We've lost air defense. Do you have any idea what this means?" Michael's voice rises to an unpleasant screech.

"Pull yourself together. The Lord promises victory. He promises martyrs as well. Do you doubt Him?"

Michael Modrek has had an easy ride most of his life. General's son, ingratiator, climber, Golden Boy. He has never had to fight through serious setbacks. Moments like this require men of experience, men who have scraped and scrambled their way to the top. Nevertheless, the Archbishop worries. If he can't get new codes, the Crusaders are once again vulnerable to NATO countermeasures. And he loses his leverage within the movement.

"On the bright side," says Hokh, "this will make the Crusade more dependent on Kulkhiz."

"I have no doubt they'll come begging. What I'm wondering is why we continue to support these losers." Vice Admiral Vraymn has a nice office comprising the top floor of an old Genoese merchant palace. They sit on the balcony overlooking Djemdjad harbor, two old guys contemplating life's funny turns.

"They still control a lot of territory," the Judge points out.

"And revenues have been falling for months, even before this latest failure. There's nothing left to steal."

"Eddie likes this Hoard of the Khazars. The real stuff, he thinks, and they find more every day. It will take a while to move."

"Promises from incompetents."

Hokh shrugs. "I don't know that market. What about the deal with Clear Sparkling? That's still on the table."

"For how long? If the Crusade has lost its defense against NATO air, their prospects for retaking Rudeny drop dramatically. They'll be of no use to Clear Sparkling's investors."

"Maybe it's time to find the company more effective partners."

"Modrek better turn things around soon." Someone raps at the office door. "OK," Vraymn says. "We'll talk again." He dismisses Hokh with a wave of the hand.

"They can't hide," Sevik promises the troops in Hidris. "Almighty God will have His vengeance." He has had to relay Michael's order, calling for a temporary halt to all but the smallest-scale raids. His intrepid defenders of the faith are not so concerned with vengeance. They are wondering how they're going to pay for porn, drugs and the incessant demands of their families if they can't go out looting freely any more. Especially they don't look forward to being sent home without plenty of cash to bribe or intimidate all the people they've pissed off.

"You promised you'd get me out of this shitpit," Dubravka tells Yorg. "You were going to take over my dad's land. Now where will you get the money?" Dubravka has had enough of Echmash. She is

desperate to return to her own village. But Yorg has skipped Crusade work for weeks. He just mopes around the house.

Yorg is pretty sure by now that her nephew Blago is dead. Even so, he's not so quick to strike women any more— which irritates him all the more. "Enough! We will attack again when we're good and ready. Or do you want to see me burned alive like Skhrote?"

Dubravka bites her tongue.

• Expand

Meeyadz is a start, but it's too small to sustain them economically or militarily. The Zimaras know they will have to expand. In small teams, they go back to the places they have carried out reunions. They talk to the women they've worked with, and to contacts they've made from the families at the refugee center. They show pictures of Meeyadz and explain what they are trying to do. If someone says they want to help, the Zimaras ask first for more names, and another conversation. They want to know which women and men might be worth approaching.

When they've met five or six people they trust, the Brigade team asks that they meet together and decide what they want to do. The Brigade needs information about Crusaders and collaborators and the local flows of guns and money. "You will have your village back," the Zimaras promise, "but it will take a lot of people working together." At some point in every conversation, they make sure to bring up the story of Berenika, and what happened to the men who killed her. The locals have their own concerns about snitches —they themselves are most at risk— and are careful who they talk to. The Crusaders catch and rape a couple of the visiting Brigade members, but the Dildos have no idea what the women are up to, and don't think to ask.

The contact teams distribute comms wherever they go. They figure the Crusaders will find and confiscate some of them, but enough will remain to keep the data stream flowing. There are no secrets on the comms they hand out, and they change their own contact numbers monthly. Because most women can't read, the Zimaras pass out audio leafs with more extensive material about the war and the Brigade. These can be run on almost any device.

A supporter back at New Start has pioneered a new comic book series, vividly drawn but at first crudely printed, to tell women's stories. Miryam finds a color press and has thousands of these printed, and soon men and women are paging through them side by side, all across the country. When they can't read they tell the story from the pictures, and somehow each storyteller comes to be telling her own story.

Little by little the Zimaras' network expands from the coast to the mountains, in tiny hamlets and the back alleys of towns like Obeyyed. There are more requests to get women and children out of trouble, and better information to help do that. There's more information about Crusader plans and capabilities, some of which goes to Kut and the Saray government. The government forces begin to turn the tables on the Crusaders, ambushing small units before they can attack some sleeping community. In pairs and threes local women come back with the teams to Meeyadz, to enroll in the Brigade.

Rekady uses Melanie's money to buy up taxi companies in the provincial towns, and a bus company. The new owner inherits the checkpoint payoff networks as well. When women drive they can't actually pick up paying passengers —their crude disguises won't hold up at close range— but now whole teams of Zimaras can pass Crusader roadblocks with all the other traffic. They are always sure to leave a generous tip for the mighty warriors.

Filipa reorganizes the contact service to Hidris. Sometimes Filipa goes, sometimes other women from her group. They want to keep in touch with Yesenya, pass on a little money and encouragement, learn what they can about the Skylanders and the women at the Nunnery.

• Dealer

No art dealers in Hidris except velvet paintings vendors, but the smuggling fraternity puts Professor Kvek in touch with a gang of tomb robbers in Israel.

"Sarmatian?" Shaller wonders, when he sees the samples.

"My principal thinks they're Old Rudeny," Kvek says.

"Your principal is an idiot." Shaller turns an ornate helmet, purses his lips. He is professionally averse to enthusiasm.

Kvek wants to know if Shaller can sell these.

"Sure. Your guy mind if I break them up? Get more for two fragments than for one intact."

The professor hates the idea, but he's only the agent. "We are looking to maximize."

"Get a better price if they're real."

"Real? O yes."

"By real I mean having a story. Old Rudeny ain't it."

"There's a story. We will have to hold off on that for the moment."

"Let me talk to Old Rudeny."

When that happens, the professor will be out of a job. "Let's see some prices, first. Then we can talk about the rest."

"The rest?"

"A lot."

"I know a guy. Let me bring him in. He'll be better able to tell us what we have."

So it is that, after an exchange of files, Doctor Faul of the Altertümers Institut flies to Tel Aviv. He's a tall lean gentleman with a freckled scalp and scraggly spit-flecked mustache. He scans a stag's head brooch with one of Shaller's machines. Kvek stands to one side, smoking a cigarette. They are in Shaller's warehouse.

"You say there's more?"

"A lot more."

"I ask this because once we start circulating these, pretty soon the legit dealers will hear about it. Before you know it the authorities in a dozen countries are looking to horn in on our deal."

"We are still in inventory. You sell these first ones, we can talk about the rest."

"It matters which items we sell first. That sets the expectations. We do it right, collectors will be fighting each other for the next piece before they see even see it.

"I'd like to see more of the selection. Then we have to arrange it so we can clear the whole lot before the AATC comes sniffing around." AATC stands for Arts and Antiquities Trafficking Control, the regulator set up by international treaty.

Doctor Faul spends the next weeks priming the art trade networks in Rome and Amsterdam.

In the middle of that flurry, Melanie the museum lady gets a call from Faul's aide and lover.

"Sent some images," he says.

"Thanks, sweetie. I'll take a look."

She gets very excited when she scans them. She lights up her own networks. A few weeks later the aide puts a deposit on the lovely cottage on the Baltic he has had his eyes on. He does not invite Doctor Faul to the open house.

● Benefit of Clergy

In reaching out to the women in other communities, the Zimaras find too often that the priests are an obstacle, especially the One Trues. They rail against democracy and rat out the women in Zimara's networks.

The women don't know what to do about the priests. For centuries they were the heart of the resistance to invading Persians, Avars, Khazars, Turks. Now too many serve the Crusader regime of rape and murder. They preach holy war against their neighbors: Jews, Muslims, Anabaptists, gay people, women. And still many women, despised and beaten, hold the priests in reverence. To criticize the priests is to attack the faith of the people.

"There are plenty of good priests," Mandalika says. "We can organize them against the bad."

"There are a few good priests," Zimara replies. "And they will offer you prayers. But try it."

Zimara herself makes it a point to stop by Meeyadz' single garage, where Father Karastepan spends his days. He has turned out to be a skilled mechanic, resurrecting many battered bikes and trucks. He wipes his hands and pours two cups of tea. They sit at a workbench.

"I appreciate your work here, Father," Zimara tells him. "I'd like it even better if you could organize the other priests. Help us tell our story in the villages. Stand up for women."

The priestly mechanic shakes his head. "I've tried. They are beyond my reach. These old guys . . . ."

"Not just old men. Plenty of younger priests hate women too."

"Well, they have old brains. They believe they are protecting people."

"By sanctioning rape and murder?"

"Of course that's not what they say," the priest replies, a bit sharply. He has heard all this before. "They support the Crusade, and regret the side effects."

"What they do to communities, to women— these are not side effects."

"Look, every army kills noncombatants and says it's for the greater good. Do you tell me the Brigade has no innocent blood on its hands?"

"You seem to have no problem distinguishing between us and them. The Crusaders themselves, and the priests who praise them, know exactly which side they're on."

"Not all One Trues are as bloodthirsty as you seem to think. They are worried about the country. Bad as this war is, they fear an outcome even worse."

"Eternal damnation."

"Families falling apart, losing their sense of morality . . . ."

"Priests losing their power over people."

Karastepan shakes his head in frustration. "I'm not trying to debate you. I'm telling you what I think is going on in their heads. I know it's hard to understand."

"Not really. They can talk all they want about what God tells them. None of that can disguise who profits from this war."

"A lot of One Trues don't profit. They suffer, same as the rest of us."

"Sure. Someone has to do the dirty work. If there were no risks they wouldn't need religion to keep their killers in line."

"The Crusaders falsify God's message."

"Let me ask you, then: what do you think makes you different from Nagahry and the rest?"

"I believe in the Word of God." Even as he says it, Karastepan realizes it makes no sense to Zimara. It's a true statement. This is how he explains his choices to himself. Archbishop Nagahry says the same thing. The priest adds lamely, "We could go round and round forever."

"Seems so." Zimara drains the cup and sets it on the bench. "I'm asking you to find others like yourself. Make a counterweight to the killers. Can you do that?"

The priest rubs his cheek with a dirty hand. "I'll try again."

So Father Karastepan dutifully makes the tour of the countryside, talks to old classmates and sounds out strangers. But Karastepan is exceptional. O, there are a few clerics who hold back from the slaughter. Maybe once they refused to bless a death squad as it set out to burn a town. Maybe a couple sheltered abused women until they could escape to the refugee camp. These men have long since been driven from the villages. They work now in government-held towns as bus drivers or shopkeepers. For the most part, the less murderous priests survive by not challenging the criminals. Even in exile, Archbishop Nagahry is still their boss. Reciting so many Hail Marys is the least of the penalties he can impose on dissenters.

Karastepan finds three or four priests who promise some help, some day. Mostly his colleagues walk out as soon as they understand what he's asking. A couple of times Karastepan has had to leave in a hurry, crouching in the back of a network car or van. He returns to Meeyadz discouraged.

So this is a problem the women never solve.

Instead, though, they create in their territory a space for everyone —Christians and Latins and Muslims and Jews (where there are any left). They stop using Crusader language, and train themselves bit by bit to stop thinking Crusader thought. In between operations, Arasely and Zimara host weekly evening classes, when fighters take turns talking about their families and home towns. Each prihvadj makes sure the men and women in her unit tell each other what they know and what they want. They fashion trust out of collective action.

Several times ambitious young women want to know why they can't fight under the sign of the cross. "We need a symbol like the Crusaders have. It will unite us. It will give us power." Senior Councillor Zimara explains again and again. "You use their weapons, you will have the kind of power they have. Is that what you want? You think fear is what keeps us together?" Gradually, most women come to understand her viewpoint, though not all agree. Some women don't feel strong enough to fight without the tokens of God's blessing, and quit.

● Fuel Supply

Zimara and Fayela are following a car that is following a petrol tanker. Avbury calls from New Start.

"Do you remember Renata and Rusla?"

"I do. The sisters."

"Lovers, but they look like sisters." Short, spare, brown women with graying hair.

"Rusla chews bem," Zimara recalls— the stimulant favored by a lot of mountain people; cheaper than tobacco, but nastier; you can tell a bem-chewer by the greenish-black stains on their teeth and the glistening quid on their floors.

"Right. She promises to quit, but she doesn't mean it."

"I know them."

"They took that health class you started, and since then they've been helping us with intake, treating some of the minor injuries so we can focus on the urgent cases. They are very good. They want to get out of here, but they can't go home. I told them about Meeyadz."

"Yes?"

"They want to talk with you. Hold on. Here's Rusla, or Renata."

"Hello. Zimara? I don't know if you remember me. You were still at New Start when I came. So what about Meeyadz? Do Zimaras ever get sick? We can help."

Zimara tells her, "It's tough out here, you know. We are cold and hungry. We're safe right now, but that's not always the case."

Renata says, "You know our story, right?"

Zimara does. They are refugees. They have seen the war up close. They are not afraid of hardship. "You know what we're trying to do here?"

"Not all of it. We hear a bit from Emiliye's brother. You try to help women, yeah?"

"Women and our families."

"Sounds all right."

"So. We do get sick and we could use your help. You come here, see what you think. You don't like it, you go back to New Start. OK?"

"OK."

"Let me talk to Avbury." Zimara tells her she'll send Rekady to pick up the new volunteers.

Avbury asks, "How is that guy?"

"He's OK," Zimara answers. Avbury can hear all the meanings in her voice.

"Here's the deal," Avbury says. "I'm going to send you the Rs, but I want them back in ten weeks. I want them to talk to the other people in the health classes, tell them what they've seen. And after working with you a while they'll have a hundred questions. This will be a chance for them to upgrade their skills. Then, if they want, they go back to Meeyadz. Make sense?"

"Yes. Here's what *I* want. When you send the sisters, send a carload of meds with them."

"When can you send Rekady?"

"Let me call back." Zimara snicks off the comm.

The fuel tanker has stopped, and the Temyat sedan following it. Appears there's been some kind of accident ahead. A car lies askew with a bashed-in side and one door hung open. The tanker driver leans out the window and yells, as if to wake the women tossed like broken dolls in the seats of the obstructing car.

Zimara stops, too. After a minute she bangs on the horn.

A guy gets out of the back seat of the Temyat and tromps over to Zimara. He's got a gun in his hand. Zimara rolls down her window.

"What the fuck," he bellows. Zimara takes off her cap and shakes out her hair. Crusader Boy's jaw drops. When Emiliye gets out the other side he looks up at her and Zimara shoots him twice in the chest. He staggers back, hands flailing, trips over something and falls backwards.

The escort car ahead tries to pull around the truck, but it's boxed in. Emiliye runs up to the passenger side. A hand comes out with a machine gun. Zimara rams the Temyat and backs away screeching. Emiliye lobs a bomb through the window, then drops and rolls off the side of the road. The sudden smear on the windshield obscures Zimara's view, so she gets out and runs past the burning car to the tanker. Already Mandalika and Fayela are at the cab, dragging down the driver. They get a sack over his head and set him in Zimara's car, with Emiliye to hold his hand.

"You OK?" Emiliye asks, and points to Zimara's face. Zimara wipes it with the back of her hand.

"Broke by doze," she says with some surprise.

Fayela and Mandalika take the tanker. Nisibis slides behind the wheel of the ambush car and pulls over to one side. She and Taissa will hold their position for ten minutes, and blast any Crusaders who try to follow. Oncoming cars turn around in a hurry and speed away from the mayhem, so the road is clear for the tanker and Zimara and Emiliye following right behind. Four vans with rebuilt insides wait for them in a warehouse fifty klicks away. That's where they'll pump out as much fuel as they can, then call the nearest village for the locals to scavenge the rest. The vans get to Meeyadz by nightfall.

Disgraced Dildo Rex used to live just down the road from where Zimara has set up her office. Now she gives his house to the new health care volunteers, to serve as a clinic. Rusla and Renata go to work as soon as they get to Meeyadz, with Zimara as one of their first patients— her broken nose is still a mess. Most of their business consists of midwifery and treating farm injuries. Their protocol with bad cases is to stabilize the injured person, then get them to New Start as soon as possible. From the mountain, in the winter, sometimes that takes weeks.

In the evenings Renata and Rusla visit families. There's a lot of malnutrition. The sisters can't create extra calories from frozen fields, but they do distribute vitamins and advice. The villagers take to calling them medicas.

• An Alternative Approach

The Crusaders take an alternative approach to health care. Sevik's man Flem, for instance, has been doing a brisk business in kidnappings. Already he has sent fourteen doctors and technicians to Hidris for safekeeping, until Doctor Sevik can negotiate ransom. Half a million Euros, Flem figures, of which Sevik and Michael Modrek will keep the jackal's share. These are all foreigners, volunteers with the government's health outreach program. Flem's Submit squad has captured twice that many Rudenyans but they are not worth the expense of hiding and guarding; the Boys kill them all.

Flem does not entirely trust his crew; he knows it's Sevik's practice to plant informers in every unit. Otherwise Flem would hold back a few hostages, keep them for his own account. At the very least that would give him some independent check on the prices Doctor Sevik says he's getting. Flem keeps his eye out for a few cutthroats he can count on. Then he won't need the middleman in Hidris.

The killings and kidnappings push the Saray government to curb or cancel the health program. This would be a big loss, not least because it's the only interaction a lot of rural people have with the government. Avbury has a big stake, too, since many of the volunteers come out of New Start staff.

"I'm not letting any more of my people join the program until the government protects them better," she tells Captain Kut.

"What do you suggest? The military offered escorts but the doctors themselves rejected that. Sick people would stay home."

"Why don't you talk to the Women's Brigade? They know the villages and they move around without raising a lot of alarms."

So that's what the administrators do. Once the medical teams leave government-held territory, a Brigade group meets them and runs interference. It's an unpleasant surprise for the Submit to the Lord killers. They get their first taste at Elkhotovo, a crossroads down in the lower Zalman Valley.

Doctor DesJarlais heads a four-person health survey team, with Miryam along as interpreter, and Brigade cars in front and behind. Just west of Elkhotovo they stop at the farmhouse of a Brigade supporter who shares recent reports of strangers driving through. He offers the health workers tea while Jaafar and his sister Nayeda take a motorbike into town to check it out.

The two join a small nervous crowd gathered in the town square in front of the pharmacy. Pregnant women, crying kids, and old men held together with dirty bandages mill around a couple of canopies set up for the mobile med team. One of the windows on the second floor of the pharmacy has been broken out, and Jaafar sees movement within. He notices too that people now and then glance up at the roof of the bank across the square. Couple guys, boots and crewcuts and bulky crucifix pendants, walk by with bags of six-packs and disappear in the alley by the pharmacy. Nayeda walks through the crowd making small talk, comes back with an estimate of the number of Dildos hidden away around the square. The locals hate the Crusader presence —they really need medical help— but no one is going to get shot just to save a bunch of foreigners. When Jaafar goes to piss in the alley, he comms the medical team to go another way. Then he calls Meeyadz for backup.

It takes the crowd awhile to notice the colorful sticker Nayeda has slapped onto the pharmacy window. It reads, "Our public health service offers care to every freedom-loving community. But due to safety concerns, we cannot serve communities harboring terrorists. Which kind of community are you?" followed by a comm number. In reality the government has no knowledge of the sticker; this is entirely Miryam's invention. The number connects to Kut's office at the Political Police.

A murmur resonates through the crowd, and people start milling around the window. They can't believe it. They glance at the sticker, and then look around to see who might have dared such defiance. Some edge away slowly, then duck around the corner and out of sight. Sevik's apprentice Flem comes stomping out of the alleyway with a couple executive assistants. "Renkich. Where is he?"

A white-haired fat guy makes his way through the crowd. He limps and leans on a cane. This is Elkhotovo's mayor.

"So where are they?" Flem demands. "You said the health team had promised to come today. Trying to play us? Think you're going to play *me*?" He gets in the old guy's face.

Maybe it's that he's so old, but the mayor does not flinch. Instead, he nods to the notice in the shop window. "Looks like you're blown, Commander."

Everyone makes way for the Crusader. Not so much as a baby cries. Flem stands hands on hips, reading, and then tries to kick in the window. It doesn't break. He tries twice more, then quits; his foot hurts bad. One of his boys hands him a tire iron; that does the trick, and keeps Flem from shooting into the crowd. The squad leader gestures to the watchers upstairs, circling his hand, forefinger to the sky. "We'll be back," he tells the mayor.

No slaughter today, boys! Just as well. Delay too long, they lose the mood and get pissy. Now, when the trucks pull up, Flem has to wait around while his boys smash windows up and down the street. They clean out the pharmacy and the shops nearby, piling into the trucks bags and boxes and clothes and bottles and fistfuls of jewelry before they climb in themselves.

The townspeople wait nervously for the Crusaders to leave. Jaafar and Nayeda get back on their motorbike and follow the Dildos at a distance, comming their direction.

The raiders' shopping spree has given the Zimaras a chance to set up along the main route out of Elkhotovo. They spread out over miles, taking cover in woods above the road. As the Submit guys convoy back towards Obeyyed, they take continuous fire for ten minutes. They leave behind four bodies in two smoking vehicles. No health care for you! The Zimaras find one guy still alive, though not entirely functional. He turns out to be very chatty. When they're done with him they deposit the husk on Kut's doorstep.

Flem tries once again a month later, with similar results. He starts seeing the "Which kind of community?" stickers everywhere, even in Crusader-held towns. No one wants his gang around, and it's hard to stop people from using their comms to warn the health teams. Flem has to rethink his business model.

The feed from Sevik's spyware doesn't turn up any sign of the hostages taken earlier, so Kut has Zimara ask Yesenya. Yesenya hasn't seen them, either, but calls back next day. Some of the cleaning women at the Nunnery have seen foreign doctors locked up in an old mine ten klicks down the mountain.

● So Gaily Undertaken

At first Borko imagines he can play the double agent, deceive Zimara and win the gratitude of the Crusaders. Squinty's rude reappearance in a melting snowdrift discourages that idea. Plus Zimara assigns a young guy to be Borko's partner in the plot, a guy Borko knows as Varadj. Really, it's Rekady in a new role.

"I know driving. I don't know spying," Rekady says. He and Zimara are taking a favorite path in the woods. He walks ahead. Zimara likes to dawdle more, scanning for fyley-root. She puts the occasional find in a shoulder bag.

"Possibly it's easier for women," she speculates. "We have to keep our mouths shut, and watch, and say what other people want to hear. For this job, though, we need a man." She bends to poke under leaves with a stick. Rekady turns around to watch.

"I'm sure Jaafar knows Kavkaz. Or Goran, how about him?"

"Yes, that's the problem. The Kavkaz Crusaders might recognize them. You know I wouldn't ask you to do this if I had a better idea." They resume walking.

"Makes me nervous."

"I don't blame you."

So it's Rekady/Varadj who makes first contact, bringing Borko's letter to the mayor of Kavkaz. Then he goes back with Borko himself.

"Give us thirty guns," Borko says. "We'll take back our village, and split the women with you."

"The hell with that," Golot says. "I've got sixty men ready to attack. Kavkaz men! Real gangsters. We'll take your shithole village, and everything in it, including those crazy women. You want to keep your house and job, you tell us what we need to know."

"He doesn't, I will," Rekady offers. Borko shoots him a poisonous look, and assures Golot that he'll take any help he can get.

The Brigade Council had happy dreams of capturing a bunch of guns, easily. Now they've got to adjust their sights. The plot matures through March, when they get the news that Golot has set a date for the assault.

Zimara dons headphones and climbs a ridge above Meeyadz. She can't see the village, just the smoke plumes rising from homes, and a sliver of paved road far down in the valley. To the east, Mount Krk marks the Kulkhiz border, and south of that, unseen, Rudomil Monastery perches atop the escarpment like a gigantic gargoyle. "I'll get you out," she promised Yesenya. Hidris seems very far away.

Zimara rehearses in her mind everything she's going to do, all the contingencies and ways to respond, until she is satisfied. Back in Meeyadz, she visits each combat group in turn, takes them through the plan until everyone knows her part. They are ready. They are eager.

Rekady and Borko make two more trips down the mountain, the last one the night before the conquest. Golot and his boys —all twenty-seven of them, less than finest quality— party all night at Kavkaz's single saloon. Well past midnight, Golot's got one arm about Borko's neck, the other sploshing beer. They sing Crusader songs— *Smite the Unbelievers!* and other chart-toppers.

Seems to Rekady that Borko does not display the proper enthusiasm, but Golot hardly notices. Rekady is a little keyed up himself. At dawn he walks around the place, kicking awake the revellers. It takes them a couple hours to assemble. After a couple of squeaky false starts, the men of the village band, themselves still half drunk, strike up a sprightly tune. The priest leads the warriors in that ancient prayer, God help us kill the neighbors! Then they climb into three trucks for the great invasion.

The Mayor insists on leading the expedition. He looks very fierce with two handguns and a Klase depending from various belts, and an enormous ancient sword, its rusty chipped blade much like Golot's grin. Takes him a couple tries to figure out that he can't sit in the cab attached to Tyrannochopper. Finally he kisses the blade and wedges it under the seat. Nor has the Mayor neglected to oil his mustaches— wild raspberry this time. Borko insists on riding up front, squeezed between Golot and the driver, so he can greet the One Trues of Meeyadz waiting to join them. Rekady climbs in the back with the others, and squeezes his way into a seat just behind the cab.

Zimara told Borko she would ambush the Kavkaz boys just below Meeyadz, where the track enters the forest. A big fat lie, in case Borko wants to get clever again. The trucks have passed a bend in the road barely two k-m from Kavkaz when Rekady fires a pistol into the little hollow at the base of Golot's head. Borko, surprised and flustered, finally untangles his own gun and puts it to the head of the lead driver, who jams on the brakes and jumps out the door. Borko turns the gun to the back of the truck,

where Rekady has been perforating hungover Crusaders; the luckiest scramble out before they're scrambled. Firing has already erupted from both sides of the road— twenty Zimaras behind trees, plus another ten between the convoy and Kavkaz. The Zimaras take care to avoid shooting up the truck engines; they want the machines. Otherwise they spray every bullet Mandalika has scrounged for them. They don't want to have to be running after armed men through the trees. Piling out of the trucks, the Crusaders can't see who is cutting them to pieces. They develop a sudden scholarly interest in soil bacteria. The driver of the third truck tries to turn it around, but ends up tipping it halfway into a ditch. He jumps out with his hands in the clouds. The remaining Crusaders find this an admirable model and do the stretch themselves; awkward when your face is in the gravel.

● Provenance

When Faul calls, Professor Kvek is hard at work in his little lab at the west end of the ancient network of cisterns beneath Rudomil. Piece by piece he has been cleaning and imaging the best of the Hoard of the Khazars for Faul to sell. Down the hall spy chief Sevik wanders among the crates and bins, picking out the cups, torqs, armlets, and inscriptions that he feels are most important, and piles them at Kvek's table for urgent attention. As far as the Professor can tell, Sevik's criterion is how shiny they are. The continual interruptions exasperate the professor. Sevik is in no good humor himself; he has been searching for days for the Sword of Rangor —the mythical implement of a mythical king— without result. Kvek puts Faul's call on speaker.

"Did you see the transfer?" the German wants to know.

"Yes," Sevik tells him. "We were expecting a bit more." He refers to the money just landed in a shell account in Cyprus. Faul has sold the first batch from the treasure.

"Early days, Doctor. Unfortunately, we can't give a good provenance. The men willing to deal take a bigger cut."

"Rapacious!" Sevik calls it. He should know.

"It takes time to develop a market. The good news is that we are getting more inquiries, which bodes well for the rest of the collection. We'll see more collectors bidding."

"So, overall, what are we talking about?"

"Hard to tell, of course, until you let me see the rest. But from what Kvek tells me, you could be looking at millions of Euros worth, maybe a hundred million."

Sevik's heart leaps. Suddenly he sees that all his struggles up to now have been puny, trivial. Grand vistas open before him. Finally he stands on the threshold of a stage truly worthy of the player.

"That's only if we're smart about how we do this," Faul interrupts. "Let the excitement build, let the billionaires think they'll have to compete for a very limited supply. We can't let a whiff get out of the magnitude of this collection— we'd have arts regulators on three continents dogging every deal."

"So what's next?"

"We're setting up the pipeline, dealers we can rely on in five cities. We've put them to work contacting clients, showing the artifacts, all very discreetly."

"The Crusade needs money now."

"Sure, and I can place some of the pieces right away. Let's just not flood the market."

Sevik looks at Kvek, who nods. "OK. We'll start slow. But in six months I want a big flow. I want a river."

"We'll get there."

"Anyway, that will give me time to complete my research."

"Research?"

"Clearly these masterpieces can be traced the first Rudeny Empire. No one has ever been able to document our history that far back. This will be a breakthrough in our understanding of the Pontic region and early Christianity."

"I never realized," Faul comments dryly.

"Yes. Your Altertümers Institut should be very interested. Perhaps once I've organized the collection, you could send a couple experts to consult with me."

"Of course," Faul agrees. Sevik hastens off to share the glad tidings with Brother Michael.

"The first Empire?" Faul asks a little later.

"Right," Kvek explains. "Supposedly back in the late second century a King Rangor conquered most of what is now Kulkhiz and Rudeny, and invited Saint Thaddeus in to convert his people. That would make Rudeny the first Christian state, before Armenia, long before Constantine made it Rome's religion. As every Crusader knows, Constantine first got the idea from Rudenyan missionaries."

"I had no idea."

"You'd have to have seen the manuscript we have here, written by a monk just before the Turks took over, that seems to make this claim. The fragment of a manuscript," he adds.

"Written a thousand years later."

"They were trying to get the Pope to raise a crusade to protect them from the Ottomans."

"Didn't work."

"Relations among eastern and western Christians were no more cordial then."

"Only problem," Faul points out, "these pieces have nothing to do with King Wrangle or Saint Thaddeus. You have found the Hoard of the Khazars, mentioned twice in the records but hidden for centuries. And we'd get better prices selling it that way."

"My bigger concern, Sevik wants me to destroy all the Jewish artifacts— citrons, menorahs, etrog boxes, coins . . . ."

"Messes up his grand thesis."

"Right. I've stashed them but I can't keep them long."

Faul is very excited. "You get them to me. I know just who would be interested."

They conspire about how to do it.

• Expedience

The Zimaras march their captives back to Kavkaz. Nineteen conquistadors, deflated a bit. Several cling to each other as they limp along. After securing the mayor's office and the plaza, Zimara calls the families to assemble. The women and old men are stunned. The mighty army left an hour ago. Now there's a new boss.

With Damyana and Nisibis, Zimara climbs the steps of the mayor's office. The villagers have heard of the woman with the slashed face. Zimara tells them, "These men have committed a great crime. They planned to rob and kill the people of Meeyadz, as they have robbed and killed your families here. They are not so brave when they face women with guns." Zimara lets them think about that for a minute. "So they must leave Kavkaz forever. Let them go to Brother Michael, or to Obeyyed, or to hell."

Some women in the crowd start crying— from sadness or relief, it's hard to tell, perhaps even for the women themselves.

Zimara pretends to consider. "We can let these men stay on two conditions. They must swear and sign an oath to protect their families and obey the laws, forever. Are you willing to do that? Here, now."

The Crusaders looked up at this. Could it be this easy? Zimara sees a couple hands edging up. But other Crusaders stand straighter, and strike down the hands of the men who raise them.

"We will not swear our honor to filthy whores," one proud warrior proclaims. He is caked in mud and bloody, swaying with exhaustion, still half drunk.

"There will be no second chance," Zimara warns them. "If you leave, you can't come back."

"I will come back and cut out your womb!"— more witty repartee.

Zimara turns to the others. "You all feel this way? Are you going to let these blowhards tell you what to do?"

No. Eight of the captives shrug off their erstwhile comrades and step forward, or sag forward, as the case may be.

"Second," Zimara continues, "you must have family who will sign guarantees. Wives, do you want these men back?" She scans the women before her. So do the Crusaders, intently. "Remember: if you take him back, and he breaks his oath, you lose your home and your land. Think about it. I ask you again: Do you want these men back?"

Of course they do. Don't they? Zimara sees some timid nods. "Then go see that woman there," Zimara points to Arasely. "You will give her the information she needs, and you both will sign and swear." The eight men and several women head to the other side of the plaza.

At this point the other women start yelling at the refuseniks. They want their husbands to stay, take care of the farm, do their damn jobs. A girl runs forward to grab one of the Crusaders, but he pushes her away.

Zimara sees that this is just a kid. "He is a boy. Let him go to his family." But again he shoves the girl away. An older Crusader yells at her too. One of the Zimaras trots up to take the girl by the arm.

"Who are you?" Zimara asks the girl.

It takes a minute for the girl to take her eyes off the boy. "Please, Isaya is just fifteen. Please make him come with me."

"No!" the older guy yells. Pretty soon the three of them are screaming at each other. They are daughter and son and father. The son wants to stay with his dad and the Crusaders.

"Where's the mother? Bring the mom!" some of the Zimaras call out. They want the boy to stay.

By now the whole crowd is getting uneasy. The Crusaders start to fidget. They are beginning to realize what's at stake. Zimara nods to Mandalika, whose squad starts herding the adamant Crusaders, including the teen, back towards the road. "They have chosen," Zimara tells the crowd. "They prefer the Crusade to their families in Kavkaz. So be it."

Nisibis is almost in tears. She grasps Zimara's sleeve. "Wait just a few minutes. Let them find the boy's mom." But Zimara shakes her head. It's too dangerous; they are close to losing control of the situation. Zimara strides toward Mandalika, who has got the captives shuffling forward now. "Do I need to come?" Zimara asks.

The question annoys Mandalika. "I know what to do," she snaps. And soon the Crusaders and their escort are out of sight. Half an hour later the villagers hear the short sharp reports, not very loud. They are all back in their homes by this time, under curfew while the Zimaras patrol the streets. The Zimaras can hear the muffled weeping.

Now the Brigade has two villages, three trucks, and a good haul of machine guns and rocket launchers. Soon they'll have more.

● Art Lover

Doctor Faul has good reason to be cautious, for his new enterprise does not go unnoticed. For instance, Avbury gets a call one day from New York. It's the beautiful woman, the rich one.

Avbury thanks her for the latest contribution. "As you've seen, it's been put to good use."

Melanie nods into the camera. "I appreciate your reports. I don't always have time to respond, but I read every one. My friends and I have been pleased." Avbury knows there are scores of people around the world who feel so pleased to have pleased Melanie. Now, evidently, Avbury has joined this select group. The Doctor lights a cigarette.

Across two seas and an ocean, Melanie scrolls down one of her screens to an extraordinary image. It's the iron buckle to an ancient shoulder harness, depicting a horseman bent over a racing horse, and twisting to one side, bow drawn. "There is something you could help me with. I have some contacts in your part of the world. Lovers of art. They tell me there are some new pieces on the market, marvelous things, maybe even part of an old hoard thought lost long ago." Melanie punches the image through to Avbury's comm. "Now if I were to find out some more details, the place where these are held, for instance, do you think Zimara's women could get them for me?"

"I don't think so."

"There may be some risk, of course, but we are prepared to pay handsomely. In addition to my private donation. Think how it could help their work."

"Let me put it more clearly: I'm sure Zimara would not be interested in trafficking historic treasure from her country."

The donor lets Avbury's rudeness linger a bit. Avbury waits, dragging on the cigarette. Melanie resumes, "At least raise the idea with her. Let her decide."

"Even to make the offer, I would lose all credibility with these women. I'm not willing to do that."

The beautiful woman shrugs. "As you wish. I thought this might be another way to help them. But there are others who will be happy for the opportunity."

Avbury relays the conversation to Zimara. "Maybe I was wrong. I don't want to jeopardize your funding."

"Our benefactor is a thief?"

"Um, yes."

Zimara bursts out laughing. "Your world is as crooked as mine."

Avbury admits, "You don't know the half of it."

Zimara thinks a minute. "When do we expect another donation?"

"A month from now, six weeks."

"OK. Let me know if she starts to play games."

"Would you do it? Steal those artifacts for her? They belong in Rudeny."

"I don't know. It's easy to make promises. If she wants to play games."

"This woman, she says she can find others to do this job. Have you heard of people doing this kind of work?"

Zimara has not, but it makes her curious. She starts to ask around.

● Community and Brigade

Because of the killing, it takes a long time for the people of Kavkaz to come round to the new regime. They follow orders all right —too scared not to— but they don't want to be seen cooperating. A lot of people didn't like Golot's gang, but who knows how long this brave new world will last?

So it's very helpful when Arax and Valenty come from Meeyadz, to explain how the council works there, and what they've been able to do. This time the Zimaras give the community longer to prepare for elections, and thanks to the Brigade's light touch, the candidates can assert their relative independence. Inevitably, though, once the new town council takes office, conflicts arise with their armed overlords over everything from taxes to the construction of tank barriers.

Zimara finds herself having to mediate between Mandalika and the town leaders. She makes it clear that the Brigade's prihvadji are going to have to figure out how to defer as much as possible to the civilians. "Otherwise no one will trust the council and we might as well not have it. One result will be that they won't take part in their own defense." Mandalika grumbles but gets the point.

That's how it comes to pass that it's the Kavkaz Council rather than the Brigade that supervises registration of all vehicles. Mandalika won't let them take over the checkpoints, but they install a delegate at each one to make sure the fighters don't get too overbearing. The council wins some disputes when Mandalika wants to cut a trench across someone's property or clear their building for a firing position, and sets the compensation when Mandalika does get her way. The town council takes Renata and Rusla under its wing when the medicas show up to establish a clinic. They reopen the school to both girls and boys. And it's the Council that sponsors the new radio station.

It's time the Brigade had a public voice to cut through the rumors and explain its purpose. In faraway Saray Miryam scrounges equipment and sends it with Rekady. They find an old generator and lug it to Zimara's basement and abuse it till it kicks over. It takes them a while, but once they're set up, they broadcast town council meetings and advertisements and futbol games. Several women apply to have their own weekly slots, and so does Gret, with a few classmates.

With her feathery voice Zimara doesn't think she'd be any good but Gret tells her, "That's why we have mikes, Mom." So Zimara starts an interview program, talking with other women and refugees about their situations and what the Brigade can do about it. When she's in town she does half an hour three times a week. Soon people across Rudeny become familiar with the wispy voice of the mysterious warlord.

● Prank

After the last lunch shift the Skylanders have to go by the kitchen and haul away carts full of garbage. Nika, always hungry, makes sure to fill her pockets on the way out. When they catch her they beat her and toss her out the back door. Usually she shrugs it off —beatings are as routine as flea bites. But one day she won't get up. She just lies on the cobblestones and sobs. The others are worried about her but they can't coax her to get up off the ground.

Suddenly she sits up by herself, and wipes away her tears. "Let me borrow your bucket, Yesenya. The cleaning rags, too."

"Where are you going?"

Nika smiles like sunshine. "Got to clean the toilets."

"Vlasta did that already. Come along."

"No, I'm sure she left some shit and piss." Nika takes bouncy steps across the courtyard.

"Nika, what are you doing?"

"Don't take the soup tomorrow," she calls back.

"Wait up, Nika!" Taline says, and hurries after her.

● Anticipate

Rudeny's new leaders passed a law that says the country's military must help any village that sets up a self-defense force. Very few communities have tried to do this; they are afraid of the Crusaders and have no faith in the central government. In turn, the government shows little faith in the country people. So they can't believe it when a delegation of women petition for help for the Brigade of the Women's Collective.

The Brigade needs to scale up its training program to accommodate all the new recruits, and because, in taking Kavkaz, they have challenged the Crusade in a big way. They have to expect and prepare for a counter-attack. The prihvadji liked the brief training they got at the Saray conference, so they ask the new Rudeny army to send someone to Kavkaz.

The first guy lasts almost a week. "Lazy, incompetent. Disrespectful to the women," Zimara complains. "I think he's worried his mates will laugh at him when he gets back to his unit." Makes her appreciate all the more Jaafar and the other men who first joined the Brigade.

"I told them," Kut says over the comm.

"Told them what?"

"I told them to take you seriously."

"Who do I need to talk to?"

"Let me find out."

Next day Zimara gets a call from a general, or so he says. "I apologize for Sergeant Ohd. Totally inappropriate. I'm sending you my best guy, Lieutenant Halevy, with two sergeants."

"We don't need clowns."

"These men are serious. They should reach you Tuesday. I want you to call back in one week, and let me know how it's going. We want this to work out." He gives her his number.

Zimara checks back with Kut. The cop says, "They have had this program on the books for a while now, but never really implemented it. The general thinks this could turn things around. If it goes well in Kavkaz, he wants to take it country-wide."

The new crew is better. They spend a couple days following Mandelika around, meeting the prihvadji, trying how to understand how the Brigade is set up. They share information about the Crusaders, and they survey the town. The women's generally low level of literacy is an obstacle, despite Zimara's reading classes. They'll have to send to Saray for the simplest training materials, with lots of pictures.

"So you see, we've got a lot of work to do," Mandalika sums up.

Lieutenant Halevy agrees. "But you got good people here, and they trust you. What do you want to work on first?"

They don't know how much time they have before the Crusaders come back in force, so they design a training program in segments, starting with the very basics of weapons handling and group tactics, and rotate the Zimaras through every two weeks. The sergeants run additional, more specialized classes in communications and explosives. Zimara and the group leaders take turns. It takes a couple of months just to cover the rudiments.

For Zimara it's hard work. Her right arm never did come back to full strength, and hurts after every training session. She finds it hard to remember how to use the radios properly, or range the mortars. But she sees how determined the other women are, and eventually how enthusiastic. Every week they can see how much their skills are improving.

A few of the Kavkaz women take part, the ones the Zimaras worked with before the takeover. Zimara doesn't yet trust the others. Nevertheless, some Kavkaz men and women watch the daily drills with keen interest, even envy.

The other thing the Brigade likes is that the trainers bring gifts: remote detonation triggers, a wireless camera network, half a dozen night sight goggles. Boots! Good ones, too— these are the

government's best propaganda. Radios— as the Crusaders rely on comms, they can't readily eavesdrop on this old tech. Mandalika demands artillery, but the government is not ready to trust them that far.

"The Crusaders have artillery," Mandalika complains.

"Exactly," Halevy says. "Too much in fact. Wouldn't you agree?"

"O," Mandalika says.

At first Halevy and his sergeants are not quite sure what to do about the miscellany of weapons the Zimaras have collected. They are used to working with units with highly standardized equipment. When they realize the long term advantages of adaptable skills and multiple sources of supply, they structure the training with that in mind.

This is what they know about the Crusaders (the Lieutenant knows from staff reports and the battlefield; the women know from seeing their parents and children murdered, their homes burned down):

Crusader units are relatively independent. They don't require a lot of supervision, but also don't support each other very well. They coordinate by ordinary comm, using cheap encryption. This leaves them vulnerable to eavesdropping and misdirection.

The jihadists like to move fast by the main roads. They arrive at a town or village well before dawn, and set up firing positions around the place. At first light they use artillery and rockets to smash any defenses, then go in with tanks and armored personnel carriers. They cut down civilians or defenders who try to flee. This kind of attack requires them to spread footsoldiers across the perimeter while concentrating the armor to punch through at one point.

The Lieutenant explains that, in the two raids since the airstrike on Skhrote's column, the Crusaders have had to change their tactics a bit. Now, instead of one column speeding down the highway, they split up and take several routes before they converge on their target. After that, they resume their accustomed pattern: surround the place, then skewer it with massed tanks and APCs. The dispersed approach lets them avoid airstrikes while in transit. By the time they regroup they're so close to the target it's hard to call strikes on them.

"You probably know, they like to close in fast, get inside the barriers. Civilians panic, start rushing around, get in the way of the defenders. And when they try to run away, Dildos on the perimeter cut them down. Strategists call this the Pequot penetration; it's how the English wiped out a community of Red Indians in North America."

"I *want* them close," Zimara says. "I want to fold them in my arms."

"It could work for us," Halevy agrees. "They've got the mobility and firepower. You don't want to be slugging it out with them at a distance. You also don't want to get trapped in a corner you can't get out of."

The Brigade isn't very big, and they can't take a lot of casualties. What's more, only a handful of the women have been in battle before, and a handful of men new to the Brigade. Zimara is not sure how they will react under fire— or how she will herself. "The worst thing would be if we got scared and started making mistakes."

Halevy says, "The training will help with that. If we can get them into town, and set up the right defenses, we should be able to move as fast as they can," the Lieutenant thinks. He adds, "The Crusaders look for soft targets. Sure, every couple months they send a few expendables against an army checkpoint or staging area. But they much prefer to rob and kill unarmed people in their homes. They won't expect much resistance here."

"So: bring them in, hit them hard, run like the devil," Mandalika summarizes.

"And then loop around and hit them from behind," Zimara proposes.

"Remember, you don't have to hold the town to win. If they take enough of a beating that they can't stay and don't want to come back, that's a victory right there."

A key question is how protect noncombatants. They have to fight hard without losing lots of local people. Otherwise their whole project is a failure. The people of Kavkaz won't join them, and they

offer no hope to other communities. To avoid such a calamity, the Brigade will prepare a speedy evacuation, and a swift savage fight.

Once noncombatants are out of harm's way, the Brigade's big challenge will be to stop Crusader tanks with no armor or artillery of its own. Zimara, the prihvadji and the training team work out a plan. They won't set mine fields around Kavkaz, because they don't have mines, and because it's too dangerous for the residents. Instead, they undertake a kind of perverse urban renewal, clearing or fortifying the roads and buildings in the town center, adding concealed passageways among buildings. Kavkaz is much bigger than Meeyadz— makes it harder to secure, but also offers certain defensive advantages: narrow winding lanes, a few four-story buildings around the main market, high walls around most houses. Weeks of excavation and obstruction make it even less inviting.

A wide creek runs along the south side of town, with stone-lined ditches draining into it from the center. The bank of the creek is the obvious place for the Crusaders to set up their perimeter firing positions. So the Brigade prepares a few concealed positions in the woods just beyond the stream. Kavkaz's main road crosses the creek at a handsome stone bridge, and runs a couple keys more to the Kulkhiz highway. There's a smaller bridge to the west, planks over an iron frame, OK for cars but way too light for tanks. Even so, the Zimaras take to removing the planks every night.

The Council has to decide some ticklish command questions. Thanks to the radios, wireless cameras and a couple handscreens, both Zimara and Mandalika can keep track of the Crusader movements, and their own people. After some discussion, the Council gives Mandalika tactical command; if she gets hurt, Zimara takes over.

"Where shall we post the Lieutenant?" Zimara directs her question to Mandalika.

"I'll do what you tell me."

"No, it's your call."

This is a bit touchy. No one wants an outsider calling the shots, and nobody wants to dilute Mandalika's authority by making it look that way. On the other hand, Halevy has useful battle experience. Mandalika decides, "He's with me." The Lieutenant merely nods.

Where to put Zimara is another question. They want her as safe as can be, and she understands their reasoning. But as she points out, "There are just not enough of us. I'll keep my head down, but I can't be in a basement." She ends up with Emiliye and the large unit to be posted near the highway.

The Zimaras get a big boost when more money flows in from the Epirus account. Now they can scroll down their weapons wish list, and feed and house the scores of Brigade women assembling at Kavkaz from all over the country. Zimara asks Avbury who the donor is, but Avbury won't tell her. Zimara doesn't care.

• Visionary

Sister Ildefa is one of the monastery's bigger attractions. The monks collect the coins and cash left at her shrine, but the devotees leave a mess, too: scores of tiny photos or prayer slips stapled or pasted to the likeness, and candle drippings all over the wooden statue and the floor. There's a voice input to one side— you can announce the offering you've made, and the person or affliction you're paying for. Names of the week's big donors flash in gold at the bottom of the screen on the wall. Periodically the monks voice in a bigger offering, *pour encourager les autres.* But the more traditional just don't feel the message gets through unless they paw and deface the saint. So once a week Goranka sends the Skylanders to scrape and polish. After an hour Ildefa reemerges gleaming, and a millimeter more gaunt.

The monks repaint her once a year, just before her feast day. It doesn't make her prettier. The crude two-meter carving depicts a bony woman in rags, on her knees, one hand on the ground, as if she's fallen; a heavy rope coiled around a brittle ankle, her face and one stick arm upraised. Chipped and

battered, distorted as if by some tectonic process; a fever dream racked on razor wire. Something out of Goya— Saturn's daughter, perhaps, the one he spit out. The howl of sanctity.

The Skylanders know the story by heart, thanks to the video narrated by Archbishop Eddie, which loops over and over while they scrape and polish. A daughter of the aristocracy, betrothed at fifteen to Prince Steyn, she rejected the match till the prince should resume the crusade against the pagan Wallaks. The prince demurred, having just concluded a peace agreement after forty years of war. Instead, the traitor confined his bride to a convent, to bring her to her senses.

The young patriot refused to eat, living two years on holy water and the smell of saffron. She became so light and pure she began to float from her bed of nettles, and the nuns had to tether her with a cord around her ankle so the wind couldn't carry her away. Barons and border lords attended the holy maiden, seeking guidance from Above. Ildefa shared with them her ecstatic visions of heavenly armies hastening the heathen back to hell.

"How do you live?" they wondered.

"Jesus feeds me," she rasped.

At length, shamed by her example, and fearing a rebellion, the prince agreed to massacre the unbelievers. But it was too late for his teen angel. She lasted just long enough to hear of Steyn's great victory, and expired with a grin. She knew it all the while: nobody beats God Almighty.

As they work the Skylanders analyze this and other tales of saints and martyrs.

"Do you think it's true?" Vlasta asks.

"Rubbish," says Taline. "Crapola."

"What's 'visions'?" Yesenya wants to know.

"You know— angels, Jesus. The heavenly host."

The Skylanders have a surprisingly concrete idea of heaven. They get it from screen games like "Heavenly Throne" and "Gates of Gold". Lots of lawns and palaces but no restrooms. The citizens have wings but swoop around without moving them— some sort of anti-gravity device perhaps, or a hidden jet pack. You can't see any loudspeakers but there's a relentlessly chirpy background ripple of flutes and xylophones, interrupted now and then by a voice of thunder. Kind of annoying but better than the torrid alternative.

One afternoon, after scraping the saintess, Yesenya prevails upon the Skylanders to stay and pray. "Let's get visions. Don't you want to see Jesus?"

Emrush starts whining. Vlasta says, "It's getting late. I want to go to Sky Land."

"It's like 'Visualize,'" Yesenya explains. "If you can see it, you can have it." One of Archbishop Eddie's media productions is a weekly show featuring people whose prayers have been answered. He has streamlined the procedure for busy modern families: name your wish, see it in your mind, ask for it, and thank Jesus when you get it. Sometimes people don't focus hard enough, don't believe with all their heart and soul, and so of course they get nothing. How can Jesus answer if they don't really pray?

The girls skip Sky Land for a week, and gather instead to pray at Ildefa's shrine. The first day Vlasta quits after a few minutes to tend to Emrush. Nika says, "Maybe we're not doing it right." Yesenya stares at the saint.

"I think I see something!" she exclaims. "It's like a flower opening up."

Nika sees it too, and gasps with delight. Unwilling to be left out, Vlasta gets back on her knees. Soon she too glimpses glory.

"It's like a huge tree, with lemons. Lots of lemons." Vlasta once ate a slice of lemon; a transformative experience, a glimpse of what the world can offer.

Taline waits sprawled in a pew, loudly crunching bem, the muscles of her jaw rippling. She watches, one hand slung over the back of the pew, tapping.

• Bureaucrats

With more women joining every day, the Brigade Council has to think carefully about the best way to structure their force. Now the Council consists of the women responsible for both combat groups and the functional units such as supply and transport. They formalize what has been true for months: there is no Collective separate from the Brigade. Reps from the community councils —Meeyadz, Kavkaz, and some newly organized places— sit in on the beginning of Brigade meetings but do not attend the operations planning sessions.

Brigade Council names Arasely the Prihvadj-Information. The job combines the roles of spy, propagandist and employee rep. Arasely has to keep tabs on the Crusaders and their sympathizers, supervise the networks in the countryside, and make sure the rank and file get heard when their own group leaders don't listen. She also sees to it that Brigade members have what they need to explain their goals.

For this last function she coordinates with Zimara to strengthen the radio program. In addition, Arasely talks often with Miryam at New Start, who relays news from the refugees and from Saray. People are beginning to hear about the Brigade's exploits, although not yet very accurately.

The prihvadji elect Mandalika Prihvadj-Combat. Her responsibilities range from supply to training and tactical planning. In practice she mostly leaves the training to Jaafar and Halevy. When there's more than one unit involved, Mandalika calls the shots in battle, with Zimara as backup.

The Families service is a new idea. The Zimaras ask Rusla to focus attention on food, housing and meds for the people of Kavkaz and Meeyadz. Rusla insists on holding the position jointly with Renata. Zimara warns, "If you do that, there will be no 'O, I thought the other one was taking care of it.' As far as we're concerned, both of you have responsibility for all of it. Right?" The Rs so promise, and so perform. As yet they have very scant resources. Zimaras tells them, "Figure out what you need, and come make the case to the Council."

• Death Squad Diva

"What a disaster," Gloria says, when she hears of the embarrassments at Kavkaz and Peshnits. She has not heard yet of Flem's disappointment. "And where is Michael Modrek in all of this?"

"You know— taking command, inspiring the troops, fine-tuning strategy," Eddie Nagahry goads her.

"The new David! Can't even catch a handful of mountain whores. The peasants are laughing at him." Gloria has had it in for her one-time lover since he mocked her for asking for a gun.

Nagahry allows himself a grin, but will not reply. Nor does he make any effort to restrain his protege. He knows she will blab to others, and that her scathing comments will strike a chord with the rank and file. Ridicule is an important tool for managing rivals, even better when you don't have to do it yourself. It suits the Archbishop just fine to let others push-push-push each other; then, when contending forces reach their highest tension, he can supply the slight nudge that sends them tumbling in the direction he wants.

He is startled, though, when Gloria says, "Why don't you let me do it?"

"Do what, my dear?"

"I'll take out this bitch. You find me the guns. I'll get some women together, and we'll kill these godless traitors."

"Hadn't we better leave it to our brave men in arms?"

"Right. The bunglers. The fat asses curled up comfortably behind the walls at Rudomil." Gloria gnaws her lip thoughtfully. The Archbishops loves to watch her do this. "And money. We'll need money," she adds.

Gloria nags him for days, until she gets the go-ahead to form her own women's death squad. She wants to call it Married to Jesus. The Archbishop thinks that's a bit much, but who is he to discourage an enthusiast? Gloria has got it into her head that Zimara Nareet is some sort of rival.

"I'm going find her and stab her and nail her head to a stake."

Nagahry pats her on the arm: "Plenty of time for that. First build me these warriors." He takes her to the warehouse, heaves open the door on the back of a truck filled with machineguns and shoulder launchers. "My gift. I have faith in you, my dear." Gloria knows better; but she smiles gratefully anyway. The only faith she needs is her faith in herself.

In truth, Nagahry has no intention of unleashing whatever pitiful mob Gloria can scrape together. It's the idea of a women's squad that he can use, as a goad to Michael and the other commanders. Actually putting it in the field, with the inevitable (he's sure) failures, would make it useless for his purposes. Maybe he'll employ the women as his personal bodyguards; he envisions a legion of Glorias in tight uniforms, snapping to attention as he walks by.

The boys at the monastery complain bitterly when hear about this new fighting force. An old man in thrall to a woman, they say about their spiritual leader. For the first time they get serious about wiping the Zimaras.

• Thief

Expanding the Brigade brings plenty of headaches.

Every group maintains a small slush fund for field expenses. The Council portions out the money, when they have it, and each group leader signs for her share, and announces the amount to her group. Zimara has no patience for paper trails. "Let prihvadji be accountable to their groups," she tells the council.

Iskra starts to steal from hers. Arasely finds out from the group members, when they complain that they have to pay out of pocket for food and transport. Arasely brings it to Zimara, who summons group leader Iskra.

Iskra denies it at first, but Zimara keeps silent as Arasely asks question after question that Iskra cannot answer. Iskra starts crying. "I did, I did. My brother was in jail. I just borrowed the money to get him out. I'll pay it back, I swear to God."

"This is very serious," Zimara says.

Iskra digs in a pocket, comes up with eight riyal fifty. "Look, I'm already saving to pay it back. I know I did wrong. Please, you must give me another chance."

"You'll hear from us. You can leave now." Zimara takes it to the Council that evening.

"You've got to send her away," Arasely says. "This is a terrible example for the Brigade, and for the people in the villages."

"It is. But Iskra has been very faithful. She gave up everything to come with us."

"So did you. So did I," Tamar points out with scorn.

Arasely persists. "The Crusaders will rot from their corruption. We can't afford to tolerate one woman stealing from the rest, even a little."

"What do the rest of you think?" Zimara looks around the table.

No one says much, until Mandalika offers, "It's up to you. You brought her to us."

"All the more reason to make a good decision," Arasely says.

"We are nothing if we don't remain true to ourselves," Zimara points out. "We give husbands a second chance. I am not going to be less forgiving of our own sister. Let me talk with Iskra. She won't do it again."

But she does. A couple months later, Iskra's ne'er-do-well brother is driving a new refrigerator truck. Arasely has eyes in every village. Again, Iskra has to confess.

This time, the Council doesn't have to push their leader. "You leave tonight," Zimara tells the thief. "First, apologize to the women in your Group." Iskra falls to her knees, wailing and praying, but Zimara has no patience with it. Finally, Iskra gets up and leaves Zimara's office. Her group, and many other women, stand outside. Iskra casts one glance at them, and then hurries off, eyes downcast. They part to let her through. A few unkind murmurs, nothing more. Mandalika drives Iskra to a crossroads where she can catch a ride to her village. Zimara has Father Karastepan type up a report:

"Two months ago, Prihvadj Iskra confessed to a theft from the funds of the Brigade. Brigade Council gave her a second chance. Were we wrong? Now she admits to stealing again. She must leave the Brigade and the Collective.

"Any member who steals from us must leave. Any member who steals from someone in the host community, will be handed over to that community for justice. We fight to free people, not to rob them. THE COUNCIL OF THE BRIGADE."

Reluctantly, Zimara also establishes a system of monthly reports, and puts Arasely in charge. Also, for the first time, the Council approves a small cash allowance for each member. They hope there will be less temptation to steal from Brigade funds, or, much worse, extort noncombatants.

● Academic Pursuits

Kulkhiz' small community of archaeologists and antiquarians is resolutely apolitical. They figure there is no way to get in trouble puttering about the remote past, collecting inscriptions and broken pottery. Ancient wars are so much safer than the modern kind.

Every three years the learned doctors celebrate their comfortable irrelevance at the Pontic Heritage conference. They feel more than a little dismay when this year's organizing committee announces a late addition to the opening plenary: Doctor Rotebagh Sevik will deliver his long-awaited research on the First Empire. They have never heard of the First Empire, but they have heard of Sevik.

Nevertheless, on the appointed day Djemdjad's finest gather in rainbow robes and funny hats amid the crooked columns and pigeon-stained statues of the Spiritual Sciences Center. Apprentice professors sound horns and drums as the chancellor of Djemdjad U. leads the procession across the tiny, dusty campus and back again. This year Djemdjad's entire press corps, eleven reporters and cameramen, have chosen to record the spectacle.

Just as the marchers reach the steps of the SSC, the roar of engines interrupts their progress. Four Groundbreakers and an APC careen across the plaza, pumping foul blue exhaust, scattering the dignitaries. The cortege halts with a screech at the entrance and a dozen Submit to the Lord lovelies pile out to surround the APC. A tall bald man in khaki climbs out of the armored car, followed by another, more muscular man, also in uniform.

Sevik and Flem stride past the dean and up the steps, the raucous gaggle of media types waddling in their wake. One of the flacks gets too close and Flem slugs him. Careful to keep out of Flem's reach, the others step over their vanquished colleague, waving cameras and clamoring for a word from the Crusader spy chief. He's not in the mood. Sevik turns around before the great bronze doors depicting the Creation, looted from Adrianople in 1155, and looks down at the crowd of researchers and historians.

"Well?" he asks, and waves them up. Flem throws open the doors and Doctor Sevik disappears within. The scholars follow doubtfully.

● Demotion

It's not working out with Damyana as group leader. She is officious and demanding and invents new rules that bear little relation to the tasks at hand. She gives her fighters assignments without training or preparation, corrects them constantly, then berates them for failing. Arasely hears this from the group members themselves, and from other prihvadji who train with Damyana's unit. Arasely meets with Damyana and nudges her back in line, which works for a while. Then the complaints begin again.

Zimara sits at a table on the porch, going over homework with the kids, when Arasely and Mandalika come to see her. The visitors hug Gret and Aloyzi, and sit on the steps until the lesson is over. Zimara can tell this is business, and dispatches the kids to a neighbor. Aloyzi runs off hooting; Gret strolls away with a book under her arm, looking back curiously.

"Let me get you some tea," Zimara offers. When she returns she joins her friends at the table.

"Damyana," Arasely begins, and explains the problem.

Zimara fidgets. She doesn't like to hear this. "Anything to add?" she asks Mandalika.

"I've seen this, too."

Zimara drums her fingers on the table. "Maybe it's time to set up a training just for the prihvadji. It's a hard job. We haven't really just sat down and talked about the best way to do it. We could have them come up with the most important jobs and skills for our women and men who take on this responsibility. Develop a standard. That would help all of us."

"Good idea," Arasely says. "Probably too late for the people in Damyana's unit, though. They are ready to walk."

"What do you mean, too late? They've got to give us time to work on this."

"Unfortunately, this is not a new problem. You have heard some of this before."

"Not like you're telling me now." Zimara turns to Mandalika. "And you, how long have you known about this?"

Mandalika shrugs. "It's not a big secret. Many of us have seen this." She doesn't have to say that Zimara should have been paying more attention. "Here's what I especially don't like: when Damyana reports to the other prihvadji, and maybe she hasn't done something she's supposed to do, she blames the women in her unit. At first she denies any mistake. Then she gives us a long story about how it's someone else's fault. And of course all this gets back to her group."

Zimara's cheek hurts. She rubs it hard with her fist and squints with the pain.

"Look," Arasely says. I didn't come to you before because I know you don't like dealing with problems like this. You rely on me to take care of them."

"The women in her unit, they could have come to me direct."

"They didn't because they know how close you are to Damyana. If they didn't know that at first, she reminds them often enough."

"And now you expect me to remove Damyana without hearing her side."

This remark annoys Mandalika. "Nobody is saying that. Listen to her all day if you want. But we have already done that. Arasely, how many times have you warned her about this?"

Arasely adds, "Zee, you can't be seen to be playing favorites."

"And I won't penalize someone just because she has been loyal to me. It's not fair. I won't have it."

Mandalika says, "You should be concerned that Damyana may be using her ties to your family to get special treatment for herself. Doesn't that make you mad?" Zimara is angry all right, at being put in this position.

Arasely says, "You know our members. They'll put up with a lot of nonsense for the sake of the Brigade. And of course they value loyalty. But they need your loyalty, too. When they're distressed enough to raise their voices, they need to know someone's listening. They need to know you have their backs."

Zimara shuts her eyes tight a moment, and opens them. "OK. The women complaining —the men in her unit, have they complained?— I need them to write up their complaints, or you write it for them. You tell them I'll read anything they give me, and I'll reply to them."

Mandalika shifts uneasily and Arasely explains, "They may be reluctant to write this down. You want names?"

"Yes, of course. I can't do anything with hearsay, and I won't tolerate malicious gossip." She has both her fists on the table. "We have to trust each other. If they feel strongly about this, they better take responsibility for it. You tell them there will be no retaliation."

The others accept this. "Maybe we should bring this up at Council," Mandalika suggests. "Make a statement: we don't like gossip, but when it comes to the safety of the Brigade and our communities, we always need true information. We don't guarantee to agree, but we protect anyone with a report or a complaint."

"OK. That will help. Can you write it up? You can ask your son to help. Meantime . . . ."

"Do you want me to tell Damyana?" Arasely asks.

"I'll do it." Zimara scowls. She doesn't like this kind of work.

"So you see I've got to hear these complaints," she tells Damyana later that day. "I'm not making any decision until I get more information. And you'll have a chance to respond. Would you rather speak with the full Council?"

Zimara touches Damyana's hand. "I know this is hard, very hard. Tell you what. You want someone to speak for you, pick any of the Council members. Let them argue for you." Zimara is thinking now of court procedure, or what she knows of it from watching TV. But when she hears Damyana's reply, Zimara knows right away there can be only one resolution.

"It's you who should be speaking for me, Zee. Haven't I given everything for you? And these others . . . they are just trying to drive a wedge between me and you. They don't care about the Brigade. They are lazy, and disobedient, and jealous. I can't believe this is happening to me." She wipes away tears of indignation.

Zimara reads the complaints, and reports to the Council. They agree with her: Damyana is not suited for responsibility for a group. Damyana has been waiting across the street, and they call her in, and tell her the decision.

Zimara adds, "There is no question here of your dedication to our work. We just need to find the right position for you. We are expanding, and we need you. We'll find you a place. So take a few days and think about the work you'd like to do now."

To everyone's surprise, Damyana takes it all very gracefully. She wipes her tears with toilet paper from her pocket, and looking to the other prihvadji, says, "I want to thank you for hearing me out, and for trusting me with this job in the first place. It has been an honor for me, and I'm sorry I fell short. Wherever you want to assign me next, I promise I'll do better." They all feel slightly guilty for having been so mean to such a nice person.

● Critical Acclaim

Doctor Sevik gets the best slot for presentation, the plenary session before lunch. He spends the morning wandering from hall to hall. He is content to watch, saying nothing, but as soon as they spot his dome in the back of the room, the presenters speak more softly, with careful circumlocutions; physically they seem to shrink. This is turning out to be the most boring conference ever, until Sevik himself takes the stage.

He argues that Saint Thaddeus did not go to Egypt, as some texts suggest, but instead headed north to convert the mountain clans under King Rangor. Rangor was not a medieval legend but an historic figure of the second century. He united the lands of Kulkhiz and Rudeny in the first Christian kingdom while Jesus' Roman followers still cowered in the catacombs. Sevik proves all this by a very original interpretation of Professor Kvek's photos from the treasure room at Rudomil. The scholars follow on their devices as Sevik's slide show struts across the big screen.

He starts with a book plaque, a sheet of tooled copper sewn into leather book bindings. This one is magnificently detailed, depicting a long-haired figure by a fountain in a garden, reaching out to a figure in the sky with long robes and chevrons at the shoulder which suggest some kind of stylized wings: obviously Archangel Gabriel telling the Untouched Virgin that nope, the rhythm method does not work. Only those familiar with the Sefer ha-Kuzari recognize this scene as the dream of Bulan, pagan King of the Khazars, in which an angel demands that he submit to God's true religion: Judaism. The giveaways are the date palm in the garden and the citrons in the king's hands, definitely not Christian iconography. Sevik thinks they are decorations. Nor does he explain the beard on the figure in the garden.

After many adventures, Bulan calls together wise men of the three great traditions, and puts it to them to explain which religion is better. The friar tells Bulan that Christianity has conquered from Byzantium to the Hebrides. The mullah explains that Islam has conquered from the Sahara to the Takla Makan. "We Jews haven't conquered anybody," the rabbi says, unaccountably forgetting the first half of the bible, "yet we have spread from Spain to China. And by the by, in doing so we have not murdered a single one of your good people, my lord." Bulan decides Judaism is just the thing for his realm, and converts right there, with all his lords.

Sevik has an image of this event, too, Figure 34: a painting in a shallow enamel basin, probably made at the Khazar court by Chinese craftsmen; only Sevik calls this one the Three Wise Men Meet Jesus in Heaven.

There's more along these lines.

Doctor Sevik's revelations elicit polite applause. The assembled scholars are well aware of Sevik's day job and have no interest in provoking him. One academic abruptly cancels the presentation he was to make later that day, and calls for a taxi. His research on the early mountain chiefdoms directly challenges Sevik's Rudeny Empire thesis. This guy has been in the university business long enough not to be sentimental. He loses three years' work, and probably the chance for a secure job. Well, he can go back to his uncle's carpet cleaning service. He'll live longer sucking solvents than making fun of the Crusade's presiding genius.

Nevertheless, the Doctor is keenly aware that not everyone is so enthusiastic about his discoveries. He sees the smirks. These dried up old men, these whitened sepulchers, have lived too long in the West, studying at the great universities, mocking the ancient truths. Ordinarily so timid, they become savage dogs when it comes to protecting their books and papers and academic careers. No matter. Sevik will stand alone for the truth, lonely prophet, no matter how much they persecute him.

It's at this time that Sevik decides that Professor Kvek will never leave Rudomil. Sevik invited him to this conference, invited him to share in the glory of this great discovery, but was met with excuses and that superior smile. The professor acts as if he agrees with Sevik's thesis, but Sevik knows these intellectual types. Even when they're afraid they can't help but let you know they think they are smarter than you. Kvek is the only other person who knows as much about these artifacts as Doctor Sevik, and he clings secretly to his false interpretation. Sevik resolves that when the packing job's done, so is Professor Kvek.

● Assault

Yelka causes a crisis for the Brigade. She was one of the first Kavkaz women to join the Brigade. She hates the Crusaders to an exceptional degree, even given the usual litany of theft and murder, so the Zimaras are delighted to have her on board. She works hard and pays attention. Arasely thinks she might become the first prihvadj from Kavkaz.

It takes a while for Arasely to realize that Yelka is poisoning relations between Brigade and townspeople. Strutting around with her unit, Yelka harasses Crusader families in the marketplace, confiscates their bikes and comms on flimsy pretexts, denounces as conspirators her personal enemies, or those of her friends.

Seeing Yelka bully the townspeople inspires a few of the other Brigade members to take up the sport. Even when they don't do it themselves, it feels good to watch erstwhile Crusaders get their comeuppance. Mandalika doesn't mind the One Trues getting a taste of the hell they have given other people. Arasely and Zimara purse their lips, but they figure, some petty retaliation is inevitable. They make many demands on the members of the Brigade; expecting them to be saintly is low on the list.

That changes after Yelka goes off on some schoolkids. She and another fighter stop three teens biking home after class. One kid is nephew to the Crusader who stole Yelka's mother's shop, and Yelka gives him a hard time and threatens to take his bike. Ervin calls her a fat bitch under his breath. Yelka hits him in the face with her handgun. When he falls to the ground she kicks him in the head. Passersby are appalled. The other kids try to get Ervin on his feet but he's completely out of it. Two of the onlookers speed off to get some help. Yelka is not sure what to do, so she and her buddy threaten the remaining teens and walk away as if nothing happened. They hope the kid comes to before his family finds out.

Zimara hears about it that evening: the kid is almost dead. Kavkaz has no doctor, so the family calls in the drugstore guy, but the boy does not respond at all. More people from the Crusader families join the vigil at Ervin's house. Several men take off in the night. Yelka goes to the Brigade barracks and stays there for safety.

Zimara and Arasely hurry to the boy's house, leaving their weapons at the office. The medica Renata has already gone inside, but the crowd in front is palpably hostile, and won't let the Brigade bigshots pass. Zimara steps back to the street to call Avbury at New Start camp.

"What a fuckup," the Doctor says.

"Really big. And if this child dies, a lot of other people might get hurt, too."

"I won't send anyone where it's not safe."

"We can keep your people safe. It's this kid's family I'm worried about. If they do something stupid they'll get a fight they cannot win."

"Neither can you, from the sound of it."

There's a commotion at the door and Zimara turns to look. It's her daughter Gret, asking after Ervin. Gret talks with someone just inside the door, and enters. Arasely, on the edge of the crowd, turns to catch Zimara's eye.

"What's going on?" the Doctor asks from New Start.

"Not sure. Can you help us?"

Doctor DesJarlais is with New Start's mobile clinic many hours away. Avbury promises to get them started, and Zimara calls for an escort to meet them halfway. She sends Arasely back to the office to round up the Brigade Council, and pushes her way back to the doorstep. "Let me in. That's my daughter in there," she says to the grim-faced men barring her way. A young woman appears in the doorway.

"You Gret's mom?"

"That's right."

The young woman gestures to the men, who move off the doorstep, glaring fiercely. She leads Zimara to a back room, where Renata and Gret, other women and the pharmacist crowd around a small still figure on a bed. He lies in a neck brace, mouth slack and breathing unevenly. Gret holds his hand and talks to him. "That's Ervin," the young woman tells the warlord. "See what you did to my son."

Renata comes out to report. "He came to briefly but was confused. He vomited a little so we cleared his throat. We braced him and sedated him to keep him still. There are a couple things we could do if we knew he was bleeding into the brain, but we don't know that and they are too risky otherwise. I'm sorry, Zee, I don't know enough."

"You're doing what can be done, Renata. Has he gotten worse?"

"Not worse. Not better. Rusla is on the way."

"Avbury's sending DesJarlais, but he won't get here till morning. So please stay with him, Renata."

"Of course."

Zimara squeezes her hand. "Could you ask Gret to step out for a moment?"

When she comes out Zimara asks, "What are you doing here, Gret? How do you know this boy?"

"School, mom," she says impatiently. "Is it true? Did the Brigade do this?"

Zimara looks at the men and women crowding in the hall behind her. "Yes. One of our people did this," she says, loud enough for them to hear. "It is a crime." Zimara kisses Gret on the forehead and pushes down the corridor, looking for Ervin's mother.

The mom sits in a back room, face in her hands, while the father argues intensely with an old guy in a wheelchair. They stop when Zimara comes in. The young guy comes right up to Zimara, hands a little wide, flexing his fingers. Zimara looks up at him.

"There is a doctor on the way, but it will take him another ten or twelve hours. I know him. He's very good."

"Don't need your God-damned doctor," Ervin's father spits. Mom looks down at her twisting hands, and the old guy closes his eyes.

"Nevertheless, he is coming. I'll be outside until he gets here."

Zimara huddles shivering by a wall until Arasely returns with some tea. Mandalika has called in every Brigade member, but they are not on the street. Instead, they take positions on the rooftops to be able to cover major intersections, just as they rehearsed in case of a Crusader attack. Also Mandalika has collected flying squads at three locations, behind gates and out of sight, in case someone calls for help. Filipa arrives at Ervin's house, and Arasely returns to the Brigade office to second Mandalika. None of Ervin's relatives stops the women but already the crowd has thinned. Zimara can only hope they are not regrouping in someone's basement, someone with a crate of automatic weapons under loose flooring. The two women's presence at Ervin's house, unarmed, is meant to let the family feel they have time; that they can kill Zimara whenever they choose; meanwhile, they can wait and see. Filipa and Zimara hope Ervin feels better real soon.

Arasely calls: the old man in the wheelchair is Ervin's maternal grandfather, not a Crusader but a big deal in the local church. It's his house the boy is in. Gret comes out towards midnight and Zimara sends her home.

DesJarlais arrives at dawn, hungry and bleary-eyed from long lousy roads, and goes right away to see the boy. Miryam has come, too, to translate. Ervin is still unconscious and breathing poorly, but the Doctor finds no spinal injury. "That's good news. We can move him to Saray as soon as you're ready."

"You want to take my son to Babylon? No. Get out," says dad.

"We can treat him here, but the chances are much better at the hospital. They have equipment and staff designed to help with just such cases." For over a year Avbury has been working with the Health Ministry to reorganize and staff the Saray hospitals. Finally some Rudenyan doctors have returned to their country.

"You can go with him," Zimara tells the father. She turns to DesJarlais. "Right?"

"Yes, of course. Ervin will want to see you when he wakes up."

"I see. Very clever. I leave with the foreigner and never come back."

"I can go. I'll go with you," Gret says.

"Are you sure?" Zimara asks her daughter.

"You told me a hundred times about New Start. I'll go with Mr. Tset. We'll look after Ervin."

Dad is afraid. He paces back and forth, teeth clenched. "And how do I know you won't just shoot me and sell Ervin to some rich queer in Europe? Tell me." Dad knows that selling children is common practice; he has done it himself, for the Crusade.

This time mom has had enough. "Bedros, if you don't take that boy to Saray, I will. And I won't come back."

His father and uncle carry Ervin to the van, which has been outfitted to transport injured people. The med team heads back down the road within minutes. Family and friends mill around helplessly in front of Ervin's home. It will be hours before they hear from New Start.

In the meantime the Zimaras keep discreet watch from the rooftops. They are doubly careful with traffic at the checkpoints but do not respond to insults from passersby. They get the word two days later: Ervin is awake and talking and eating. They see him on grandpa's comm. The crowd camped out at Ervin's house finally go home, and some of the Zimaras do, too.

Yelka's family visits her at the barracks, but the Zimaras won't let her go home, nor does she want to. She's safer around groupmates with guns. Zimara wants Yelka's group to judge her, but Arasely points out, "What are they going to do? She's new, but they are not going to condemn a teammate." So it's up to the Brigade Council. They kick Yelka out of the Brigade and out of town. Henceforth, group members charged with wrongdoing will be judged by the members of a different group.

Zimara insists that every Brigade member chip in to compensate Ervin's family. She herself contributes a month's salary. "I had the final responsibility, and I ignored it," she says. "But we all have to pay because it's up to each of us to make sure this can never happen again." Three women think the whole uproar is unfair, that Yelka didn't do anything wrong. They quit the Brigade, which no one laments.

The boy and his dad come back a month later. Ervin has put on a bit of weight, and walks about solemnly, a bit taken with his celebrity status. Mr. Tset just growls, but at night with his homeboys, a bottle of plum brandy in his fist, happily complains for hours about all the things wrong with life in the big city; clearly he has studied it carefully.

Rekady brings Gret three weeks after that. She stayed with Dr. Avbury and took the health care outreach training with others at the camp. "Look what Grace gave me!" she says, rolling in a shiny blue bike with a big med kit on the handlebars; it looks like a tackle box. She talks a mile a minute about Saray and the refugee camp. She is a little taller and more confident.

Aloyzi hangs back, uncharacteristically shy, until Gret embraces him. His eyes are full of the beautiful bicycle. "Can I try it, Gret?"

"No," she says. She calls Rekady, who wheels in another bike with lightning bolts on the crossbars.

Rusla and Renata put Gret to work right away, helping at the clinic after school.

• Welcome

There is another problem with Damyana, although Zimara doesn't know it.

After Damyana's stepfather disappeared, dragooned into the Crusade, her mom Fadees returned to her home town, a little place on Rudeny's coast called Besim Brod. She lives there with her brother's family. They treat her like a servant. So Damyana takes leave to visit Besim Brod with three women from her new unit. They find Damyana's Uncle Mirko in his boat repair shop, smoking dope with a couple of his employees. They lock the employees in a storage shed.

"Uncle, I want to thank you so much for taking care of my mom," Damyana says. "There's just one little thing . . . ." More like ten. When Mirko gets sulky Damyana pokes around his workshop. She hefts one end of a heavy laminator, then carefully puts it back. "I'm surprised you smoke here, Uncle. You've got all these flammables. Wouldn't take anything to start a fire."

"You can burn me out," Mirko points out. "Then where would your mom go?"

"Why, I guess she'd come back with us. You, on the other hand— we'll always be able to find you right here in Besim Brod."

They reach an understanding. Message delivered, Damyana's teammates head back to Kavkaz, but Damyana decides to stick around a few days. Mirko and his wife clear out to let Damyana and her mom have their room. And they're careful how they talk to Fadees— by now everyone's heard of the Women's Brigade. Fadees doesn't know how long it will last, but for the time being she basks in her new status. She is always polite when she makes her sister-in-law fetch.

Every time Damyana goes into town she passes the drive to the hilltop compound where her mom used to work when Damyana was a child. Crusader gangs move freely in this part of the country, but it's too near Saray for them to occupy directly. Instead, they do business with the Dvelko family.

Generations ago the family seized this ramshackle Venetian fortress on the bluff above the bay, and have been feeding off this district ever since. Once pirates, then aristocrats, now they are entrepreneurs, though no one cares to say exactly what they make or trade. An uncle runs the main anti-government publisher in Saray. Another is Besim's chief of police, with his very own speedboat; half his revenue comes from taxing the smugglers of refugees along this coast. At one time the Zimaras discussed getting into the business, to provide a low cost, safer alternative. They soon realized the local police would fight any price-cutting competition.

Commander Gloria is the most illustrious of the Dvelko progeny. The civil war crippled the family businesses, until Gloria's Crusader connections revived them. She got one of her brothers a job in the Archbishop's Spiritual Warfare telecomm studio, and another manages Eddie's Euro accounts in Cyprus. The Crusaders also help fend off Bryony's gang's occasional probes into the family territory.

Fadees used to take Damyana with her to help cook and clean for the family. Damyana still remembers the long hallways, the rooms filled with contraband, the curt directives from women who never looked at them, and the girl Damyana's age, sitting on the upstairs balcony, swinging her legs through the bars of the railing, watching the servants with a kind of hopeful boredom. If she'd had a long stick she would have prodded them like bugs, to see what they'd do. Instead, she stared at Damyana, and stuck out her tongue.

"What's up with the Dvelkoi these days?" Damyana asks now.

"Never you mind," her mom says. She has no fond memories of her time there. So Damyana decides to find out for herself. She sends over a box of pistachio pastry, with a leaf announcing her plan to visit the next day— something Damyana would never have done in the old days, but she has learned from Zimara to be bold.

"You don't belong there," Fadees tells her.

"It's just a visit, mom," Damyana says. "They are no better than us." Damyana putters about her uncle's kitchen, assembling tools and ingredients. She wants to make something special.

"What are you doing?"

"A kusmayek, I thought. I used to make a very nice kusmayek."

"That's not the way you do it," her mother says, and elbows her aside. "I'll need lamb and eggplant and more garlic. I think we've got the rest. Sesame! Go!"

The parking lot spills over with late model Groundbreakers and SUVs. They'll be gone tomorrow or the next day, and replaced again next week. To one side of the compound a man props himself on a box on a loading dock, smoking. Damyana picks her way across the broken asphalt and leans on the bar at the

steel-strapped three-meter portal. A rottweiler chained under a tree launches at her snarling, long curls of drool splashing on the flagstones.

"Back off, bitch," Damyana growls. "I'll gut you from throat to crotch." In fact she has strapped a ceramic dagger to her belly, knowing no one will think to search a woman. The dog hesitates, uncertain.

The door camera flashes to get Damyana's attention. A young guy in a plastic jacket pulls back the door. It slides silently on hydraulic hinges. He's chewing gum and thumbing a comm. He has the Dvelko cheekbones; whose son is he? The boy doesn't take his eyes off the screen.

"Hi! I'm Damyana." She hands over her chip, which he taps to his device. A little surprised at the response, he looks at her for the first time. He jerks his head his head for her to follow. First, though, she thrusts at him the basket of Fadees' kusmayek. "I made it myself." He takes it gracelessly and leads her inside. They walk past a metal detector into a long, high-ceilinged corridor.

The walls are pink and gold, with elaborate plastic molding at every join. Mirrors flash from deep inside frames of cream and chocolate, rippled like melting ice cream. Massive chandeliers drip colored glass, swaying slightly on the faintest of polymer filament. There's no one else in the hallways. Most of the inner doors are closed.

When they pass through the courtyard Damyana sees stacks of boxes, many with their original fake brand labels —shoes, electronics, liquor, pharmaceuticals, some kind of printing machinery, a crate of drones— some piled onto the dry and cracked masonry of what was once a garden pool. A dusty huddle of platberry shrubs summon among them a half dozen browning blooms. At the far end two young women in smocks and facemasks wrap small plastic packs in sticktite and gaily colored ribbon— party favors? Some event coming up? They work fast; no time to gawk at visitors. The teen leads Damyana past the family chapel into another wing of the building. They take an ornate open-grill elevator to the third floor.

The top floor is a kind of terraced pavilion, all sides open to vistas of sea and shore far below. A pair of martins swoop between the columns and tuck lightly into the braces under the eaves. A small wrinkled woman sits on carpets splashed in carmine and cerulean on a low dais in the center.

"Grandma."

"Thank you, Danilo."

The young man tips his head and turns back to the elevator. The old woman beckons, a doughy lump wrapped in black, like millet paste in grape leaves. Damyana takes a few steps and stops. Her boldness seems to desert her. She remembers this woman, already ancient thirty years ago.

"Nderadj," she says, and despite herself, clasps her hands and bows her head. It's all she can do to keep from falling on her knees.

"Larissa, please," her host corrects, with a dazzling smile. For a moment she looks like a girl. "Come." She holds up her hand for Damyana to grasp. She hoists herself up, creaking, and takes Damyana by the arms. "Let me look at you! The famous Damyana! How lovely of you to think of us." They embrace. Holding Damyana's hand, the Nderadj sinks again to the carpet. She pats the pillow beside her. "Sit by me."

Could it be the old lady remembers her? Amazed, Damyana sits by the matriarch of the Dvelkoi.

"Girl," her host commands, without raising her voice. "Tea." Damyana looks around in confusion. She knows that tone. She's supposed to fetch the tea? Now Damyana notices the young woman sitting on a mat to one side of the elevator. A towering tea set sits on a low table beside her. The woman rises gracefully, blue and black skirt polishing the ribs of her sandals, and carries over the tray. She sits and pours and passes the cups to host and visitor. She puts a silver stand between them, piled with the pastries Damyana sent the day before, still cold from the refrigerator. The old woman goes first: a delicate lick and then a long-toothed tear at the frothy concoction. She nods for Damyana to do the same. Another nod and the servant retreats to her place by the elevator. Larissa sets the uneaten part of the pastry on a napkin, and brushes her fingertips.

“First, I want to know, how is your mom? What is Fadees doing these days?” Turns out Larissa knows all about Fadees' missing husband, and her brother's boat shop —"A fine craftsman. My sons employ him often"— and the usual plight of a middle-aged woman with no husband. "It's the war. A tragedy for so many." Damyana realizes with alarm that the old lady must know of her own precipitate flight from this place two years ago— the loathed betrothed, the smothered baby. But Larissa turns the conversation to more congenial topics.

"Tell me about this brave band of women that you lead."

"O, it's not just me. There's Arasely and Emiliye and Mandalika and Zimara . . . . We're trying to bring justice to the women of Rudeny."

"That's so important. I envy you, doing such good work. We old people . . . ." She sighs and spreads her hands. "Come! Please, take more." She reaches over to pour tea for them both. Far from the forbidding matriarch of Damyana's childhood, she is really more of a chatty neighbor. Lonely in her old age, and grateful for the company.

At the end, Larissa summons the servant again. “Bring Vikhna.” While they wait, Larissa takes Damyana's hand. To Damyana it feels like squeezing a robot claw through a half filled water balloon.

"Child, do you pray? Pray with me. I want to give thanks that you've come home to us."

Vikhna comes off the elevator. A tall, handsome woman, late forties, getting thick now. She married Larissa’s son, and begot Commander Gloria— the little girl on the balcony watching Damyana so many years ago. Bejeweled, painted, startling red hair piled high beneath her topi, she bulges just a bit through the expensive activewear from the catalogs from Milan. Her mother-in-law runs the household, controls the servants and the money. Vikhna does a bit of fundraising for the church, grudgingly. Otherwise, she has no function here except to produce boys, and that’s almost over. There’s an eight-year-old around here somewhere, but Vikhna is not that interested; in a few years he’ll be inducted into the gang like his older brothers, and will disappear from her life. Vikhna spends her time shopping online, Princeps Doozeeym and like that; not the cheap print-outs favored by these bumpkins of the Dvelkoi. The Nderadj waves her forward. Damyana stands.

“Damyana, do you remember my son’s wife?”

“Of course. I’m honored.” Damyana takes Vikhna’s hand in both of her own. Vikhna waits to be released.

"I want you to see to it Damyana has everything she needs while she's with us."

“Of course. We’re happy to help any daughter of Fadees.”

“And perhaps Damyana would like to join you at the Ready for Love tomorrow night.” Every year the families get together to staple GPS trackers to the ears of their ten-year-olds. Among daughters of the pious middle class, it has become quite the rite of passage, a combination coming-out party and cattle auction. Vikhna extracts her hand and turns to the old lady. Damyana can’t see Vikhna’s face.

“So pleased. I didn’t realize Damyana would be with us so long.”

“O I couldn’t possibly,” Damyana objects. “Will Father Semarem be there?” He’s the local boy made good, and now the host of a national radio program.

“Of course. I’m sure he’d love to meet you. Wouldn’t he, Vikhna?” Larissa insists. “And be sure to bring along your lovely mother.” Vikhna turns to the visitor with a rigid smile.

“Yes. Do ask Fadees.”

Damyana is not stupid. She knows it will be a stretch to attend herself. Her mom? Fadees just wouldn’t fit in. “I wish she could. Mom has been feeling a bit poorly lately.”

“So sad. But you’ll join us, won’t you?”

Damyana puts a hand to her chin. She tries to think who she can hit up for a couple hundred riyal, and where she could buy a nice dress in this burg. The Dvelkoi women have no trouble reading her hesitation.

“And please, before you leave,” says the Nderadj, “let Vikhna show you a few things. Perhaps you’ll find something Fadees might like.”

They take the elevator, and Vikhna leads Damyana to the family chapel. They have taped off the altar section. Racks and bins of clothes and electronics cram the rest of the space, and castoffs strew the floor; other scavengers have passed this way. A pile of furniture teeters by a stained-glass window, a jumble of screens, desks, and exercise equipment, some broken and sagging. Damyana flits from one treasure to another, scarcely able to decide. Gloria's mom presses on her something long with lots of beads.

"Very beautiful, thank you Vikhna, but it's too much."

"All our guests accept gifts," her hostess explains, as if instructing her guest which fork to use. When Vikhna was little and just newly acquired she had to walk the Dvelko watchdogs. Right now she feels like that, walking the dog, waiting for it to shit. She knows it's no use to tug on the leash; that just makes everything take longer.

But having offered the token protest, Damyana needs no further encouragement. She settles on something in blue shiffon with plastic fabric stripes that shine like silver, and matching vest and cap. "Can I get something for my mother?" she asks, and doesn't wait for the answer. Damyana also requests a couple bags to carry her loot. It's not quite classy to walk back down the hill loaded with such finery for all to see.

● Tourists

In the middle of all the tactical preparations, Kut arrives, a newly minted colonel. That's right, the cop's career is back on track, thanks to the golden intell streaming in from Rudomil. This time he brings with him a Mr. 'Deesh, president of the National Assembly, a little whirligig of a man. Seems a bit off his feed at first; doesn't often get out to the provinces, and normally takes care to put a lot of k-m between himself and the front lines. But Kut has coached Zimara well, and she knows just what to say.

"You don't know how much it means to us, your help protecting our families. I think this is where democracy starts, don't you? Here we decide together what to do." Zimara takes his arm in hers and gives him the tour— the Brigade at drill, for sure, but also the construction work around town, the kids at school, the teeming market. A tall, battered-looking man follows them with a camera, making sure to center each image on the Assembly President. Zimara takes care to introduce 'Deesh to each of the prihvadji in town this day. Already she feels inspired to plan embassies to Saray for more guns, food, meds. In spite of themselves, the people of Kavkaz are impressed, too; it's been years since they've seen a national politician.

Shrewdly, 'Deesh asks how many of the locals have joined the Brigade.

"So far only a handful. It's a big shortcoming on our part." Zimara looks sidelong at him, wondering for the first time whether there's something inside the suit. "Are you very disappointed?"

The politician continues plowing through the crowd, greeting people and shaking hands. "When we took over after the elections," he tells her, "the generals had been in power for forty years. They did a lot of damage, not just to our cities and villages, but to our skills and institutions. It takes time to re-learn how to do democracy." He glances back at Zimara. "Let's see what it looks like when I come back next year."

Next year! It heartens Zimara to hear that this outsider assumes the Brigade will still be around then. Maybe we will, she thinks.

Mr. 'Deesh makes a kindly, calorie-free speech on the steps of the town offices. Then, to Zimara's surprise, he performs a little ceremony. 'Deesh pins on her a ribbon that makes her a captain in the Kavkaz Area Citizen Defense. That's what the government calls the Brigade.

"I've got another for Mandalika," he says. "When can I meet her?"

"Out of town." Zimara turns to Colonel Kut. "I never heard of Citizen Defense," she complains.

"Invented specially for you. That's how you get Lieutenant Halevy and the military goodies."

"Does this mean I'll have to take orders?" she asks through clenched teeth.

"That's the intention," Kut nods. "You make them nervous. Does that surprise you?"

"I take orders from the Council," she says.

'Deesh has been listening. "The capital is far away, Captain," he reminds her, without interrupting his smile. He pumps her hand for the camera. "But you're in politics now. You must make your accommodations, as do we all."

As the helicopter whisks him away, Zimara shoves her captain's ribbon back into the box it came in, and hands it to Arasely. "Please put this somewhere. Somewhere else."

Arasely salutes her smartly, grinning. "Right away, Cap'n."

"Don't you dare." Zimara wants never see this foreign insignia again, but suspects she might have to. She despises armies, although she's making one. Like a lot of people, Zimara is not entirely consistent.

"You did good," Kut comms later. "'Deesh has been bragging to all and sundry about his new project in Kavkaz. He's going to send a video team. You don't mind, do you?"

Zimara does mind, and the Council agrees. Instead, they ask Miryam at New Start to find them journalists who will understand their work, and record it accurately. Finally they've got a chance to reach a national audience. All her life Zimara has been assailed by gangster propaganda; now she can generate some of her own.

• Damyana Makes a Friend

One of the Dvelko hangers-on, the wife of a second-tier crew boss, hosts the Ready for Love party at a spacious second floor apartment downtown. You can hear the boombox from blocks away— mostly Haleesa Sladek Seerchay, heartthrob on two continents. Inside, the guests dodge banners in gold and cinnabar, plastic Virgins, food carts, angel knicknacks, scampering teens and bowls of burning bem— these latter a definite hazard, given the polymer gowns fluttering by, but they help mask the fumes from the parking garage below.

By a window they have placed a pea green plastic lounge chair with a spotless cloth napkin draped over the headrest, and some tools and alcohol on a table nearby. Here's where peanut-head Doctor Golbenk —Exegetical University of Hidris, he's got the certificate in a holo right there on the table— Doctor Golbenk in his brown-stained lab coat will puncture the girls one by one, to insert in their ears the GPS trackers that make them ready for auction. Unseen, in the back, a midwife waits; might as well get it all done at once; make sure daddy hasn't been at them. When they come out each girl clutches a nicely decorated form printed off the internet, Love Intact, with the girl's name, signed by the midwife and the local priest.

The mothers of these girls loll on ice cream colored couches by the walls, cushions piled so high their feet don't quite reach the floor. They compare their stolen jewelry, gossip about the Dvelkoi and subtly savage the prospects of their daughters' rivals— who may also become marriage prospects for their sons. All the more reason to criticize. This event is the first round in a long process of pricing these children, ultimately to determine what dowry their families will have to pay to get rid of them. The poorest families with the smallest, ugliest girls will naturally have to pay more.

The girls themselves, ears bandaged, dance with each other with a kind of fierce joy. This is their coming out party. For a few weeks they are on display, fed and dressed well, decorated, praised, before they disappear once more into the maw of some stranger's piously voracious family.

This evening's most illustrious guest, Vikhna Dvelko, sails in like Cleopatra's barge, depositing Damyana by the door like some drowned rodent stirred up in her wake. The other matrons, wives of the local gentry, none so grand as Larissa's son's wife, swarm Vikhna like ants to a squashed and sidewalk-baked tootsie roll. Each aspires to a Dvelko groom for their child, or failing that, a Dvelko bride.

They see Damyana, too, and comment, careless as to whether she can hear them. Damyana plucks at the shoulders of her new dress —the shimmery stuff grates on her skin like broken bits of beetle wings— and introduces herself to the clique occupying the strategic ground by the door. "I'm Damyana. You might know my mom Fadees."

They do. The cleaning lady. They wonder what Damyana is doing here, with Vikhna Dvelko no less. A minor gangster's wife, nearly buried in pillows and drapery, nods with towering headgear toward the tables crowded with cakes and casseroles: "You'll find food over there." Damyana gets in line. They watch to see how much she'll eat. So she doesn't take much, just a token ball of spiced spinach and a cup of something red and sticky. She waves at her audience with a snarky smile and they look away.

Damyana is not the only newcomer here. She hears other women in line introducing themselves with the standard greeting: "Have you sons?" or, "How are your sons?" Just as well they don't ask Damyana; her own kid lasted but a few minutes. Damyana could lie, but in small towns like this, everybody knows your business. A twirling dancer slides into her, but Damyana spills only a little. She looks around for a place to set down.

"Bitches, aren't they?" Damyana turns. She hasn't seen Gloria Dvelko in nearly twenty years, but here she is, blonde and sleek in a one-piece flight suit. "Peasants," adds the Crusader, nodding at the armored ranks of motherhood. "They've never been out of Besim Brod. Never mind them. Come with me, I want to show you something." She takes Damyana's arm in her own and leads her out the door. Gloria nods gaily to her mom across the room; Vikhna stares at the two younger women without expression. The smoke, the noise, the graceless gowns and furniture— Vikhna won't stay long.

Outside, Gloria says, "Let me show you my favorite place. We'll have to walk, if you don't mind. Probably you drive all the time. Can I tell you a secret?" She squeezes Damyana's arm. "Sometimes I do, too. The Archbishop lets me drive his Luhoso around the compound whenever I want. He doesn't mind at all. He's a progressive man, very advanced in his thinking." Arm in arm they stroll the few blocks to the town's outskirts, and climb the rocky hillside. The moon climbs with them.

Back at the apartment, Father Semarem sweeps into the throng, skirts swirling, setting all the guests atwitter. This local celebrity, not yet thirty but august beyond his years (and why can't more of the local boys be like him?) is famous now for his radio show, the Love Shepherd. For years he has guided anxious families through the joys and perils of acquiring quality breedstock for their sons. Strategic alliances, hefty dowries, sturdy hips and stolid obedience, all these factors must be considered. Attractiveness, too, but not so much— the rich boys will buy concubines in any case. The radio priest is like a real estate agent who represents both parties. The parents go along because they know he closes fast. Semarem doesn't like a lot of inventory hanging around, and bullies and cajoles both parties until the deal is done. The parents may have to raise their offers, or accept a match with a low class family, but that's less humiliating than getting stuck with an aging spinster.

The other helpful service Semarem offers is holding the dowries in escrow. If the girl doesn't show up (it's been known to happen: the girl goes mad or kills herself), the boy's family is entitled to ten percent of the agreed upon dowry. It's also a kind of insurance that daddy doesn't damage the girl after he signs the contract.

Only after he blesses the blissful couple does the priest get his cut: from a crowd like this, a few hundred riyal cash, free food at the local eateries, a job for a relative, or renovations at his home. The most successful marriages —the ones where the girl gets fobbed off on some rich businessman— conclude with a land grant to the church. By now Father Semarem has become the second biggest landowner along this stretch of coast.

The hostess and her entourage coax the priest to sit with them. A beribboned toy dog runs up to greet him, and the priest stoops to scratch behind its ears. "How are you, old Puff?" he booms, but waits till Puff's owner shoos the dog away before he sits. As the women settle to either side, the priest brushes dog hair off his skirt, and slides to his lap the shoulder-strap screenpad, streamlined and silver-black (the height of fashion last year in Pesht). He could be a pro coach, scouting local talent at the neighborhood futbol match. He talks as he scrolls. The women lean in to hear.

For the hostess and a couple other notables, Semarem greases the suppository with token praise: "Lovely dress. Must have cost a thousand riyal," or "I like what you've done with her nose." Otherwise, brutal frankness is his stock in trade. All the girls are too fat or too thin, too drab or too risque, too lazy or too smart. No other broker's assessment is so cutting and yet so comprehensive. Hair, hands, posture, clothing, makeup . . . My god the makeup! The girls achieve that alluring mysterious-eyes look all right, plastering so much eyeliner their eyeballs look like they've rolled down a coal chute and can't figure the way out. "And the brothers?" Semarem might inquire, since a girl whose mom has lots of sons might bear lots herself.

The matrons ply him with sweets, but he is incorruptible. "That girl talks too much." "Anzhela's teeth" —here he shakes his head— "I have a dentist who can replace them with pearlite, very reasonable." The priest nibbles busily with his own long rodent teeth, and smacks fat lips while his mustaches pump up and down like maddened geckos.

The girls have been coached and dressed to hide their flaws, but they can't fool the Love Shepherd. "Not very sexy," he might say about a child's mouth or voice— just the kind of no-nonsense appraisal their moms appreciate. These ignorant little girls, how are they supposed to know how to make themselves ready if no one will teach them? Their fathers, the lummoxes, barely do more than point and grunt. The moms feel lucky they can rely on Father Semarem's sophisticated attitude toward such things.

They watch his hands and eyes for signs of whom he favors. Unable to bear the suspense, a couple women venture their own comments, to see if he'll agree. It's a big treat when ever so slightly he tips his head at some remark. Semarem toys with the matrons, smiling on this candidate or that. Mostly he seems intent on the screenpad, tapping it steadily with long lovely fingers; the others can't tell if he's taking notes or reading today's feed from the gossip services. Only at the end will he zip the pad, fold his hands, and indicate with that slight, momentous bow of the head whom he'll recommend as a fit bride for the Dvelkoi.

Elbows on knees, Damyana and her new friend sit in the grass on a hill above the bay, watching the portside lights, and the fluorescing wakes of boats with no lights, going on about their private business.

"Sometimes I run up here early in the morning. I love this place," the Crusader confides. "Makes me feel closer to Jesus, you know?"

Damyana squeezes her hand. She knows.

"I want to thank you for coming to visit my grandma," Gloria continues. "It means a lot to her."

They don't talk about the war at all. Gloria does have some funny stories about the Crusader commanders. Damyana must have said something equally amusing, because Gloria throws her head back and laughs. Lovely throat, thrilling voice. Her teeth shine in the moonlight. She kisses Damyana on the cheek.

"It's so nice to meet someone who understands," Gloria says. "We are both outsiders, I think. You don't know how much it means to me." Damyana can't trust herself to speak, but holds tight the other's hand.

"Even the Archbishop doesn't really understand," Gloria explains. "But he is a fine man, a real man, pious and wise and not afraid to fight for what's in his heart. I wish everyone had such a leader. And Brother Michael . . . ."

Damyana doesn't want to spoil the mood by mentioning Zimara. She feels the stirrings of a new admiration, and it's not for Archbishop Eddie.

In the following days, the Crusader and the Brigade fighter run together at daybreak. They pass men and women wrapped against the wind, carrying firewood, driving sheep, pushing carts. The workers move aside without a word. Of course the early walkers all know Commander Gloria. They have seen her run before. Maybe women do this kind of thing in Kulkhiz.

Heart pounding, Damyana doesn't care what they think. She wants them to see her.

One day Damyana sees a handsome young man arguing in an insolent way with Gloria. Damyana saw him before at Larissa's house. She describes him to her mom.

"That's Danilo. He's Gloria's bastard. You didn't know that? That family there, no respect for anyone, including each other."

A few days after Gloria returns to Kulkhiz, a truck pulls up to Damyana's uncle's workshop, and the men roll out a heavy box. It's a new outboard motor, quite powerful. The tag says, "For D's uncle, Love, G." After that, Mirko and his wife no longer act so surly. Fadees will be OK when Damyana leaves.

● Unbeliever

Eddie Nagahry lies in bed, dabbing sweat off his belly with a crumpled purple silk sock.

Gloria says, "Had a comm from my grandma. She met a big shot in the Women's Brigade."

"Larissa knows a Zimara?"

"This one's family used to clean our toilets. I thought it would be good to find out more, so I went to meet this woman. As I expected, just a peasant with a big mouth. She told me about the women who took Kavkaz."

"Ask her about the men. Unit numbers. I'll bet that sly bastard Kut has a hand in this."

"The way this woman Damyana describes it, the fighting at Kavkaz was mostly women with a handful of men."

"That's a crock. Don't be taken in by all that big talk." Eddie waves the sock in his fist. Gloria wants to play the woman warrior, dress up in uniform, fine. She can't actually believe this crap. "OK, some women insult the Crusade. Big deal. The liberals love to have women do their talking for them. It's just propaganda," he insists. "The fight at Kavkaz, one town raids another, happens all the time."

The Archbishop's reaction is no surprise to Commander Gloria. But she has done her duty by reporting. Now she's clear to go ahead with her plans.

● Absolution

Damyana feels bad for a minute. She wonders if she has jeopardized her immortal soul. She checks with Father Karastepan.

"There is a family . . . they've been so nice to my mom. But I think they want to know about the Brigade."

"Why does that trouble you?"

They're already in the confessional, but Damyana whispers. "I think they may be smugglers."

The priest knows where she comes from. "You're talking about the Dvelkoi."

"Yes."

"A fine bunch of scoundrels. Did you talk to them about your work?"

"Of course not. Only a little, in passing. The grandma was asking about me and my mom. Anyway, I should think we'd be proud to let everyone know about our work."

"You know there's some things you can't talk about."

"It's not like I was blabbing operational details."

"I know you have good intentions. But those people do not. It's OK to be polite while you're in Besim Brod, but you can't talk about the Brigade." Father Karastepan gives Damyana penance, and absolves her of her sins. He doesn't think to mention it to Arasely or Zimara; secrets of the confessional and all.

Next time she gets a call from Gloria Dvelko, Damyana doesn't hesitate to take it. "Father said I must be polite," she reminds herself.

● The Bandit Zimara

For security reasons, Zimara won't allow journalists to take her picture, so Gloria has a poster drawn from Damyana's description. Not a very good likeness, but the zeta carved in Zimara's cheek is unmistakable. Soon it adorns office doors and windows throughout Crusader territory. People take to snatching them from walls and taping them to their refrigerators. Gloria captions it, "The Bandit Zimara." And below that, in bigger type, "KILL THIS BLASPHEMING WHORE."

Not long after Gloria's poster first appears, a young woman tries to enlist in the Women's Brigade. Anastasiye doesn't think she's old enough, sends her home. Next day the girl shows up again, her face puffy with a big Z tattoo. "Can't go home again," she explains.

After seeing a few of the older members adopt the design, Arasely puts a stop to it. "It's too dangerous," she explains. "We need you to be able to go into the villages." So some of the women take to having a tiny Z carved or tattooed into their scalp, under their hair. Zimara sternly disapproves; in private, however, she admires their commitment. She regards the tattoo as a kind of promise they make to themselves.

● Kill Zone

The Zimaras have spotter teams in Obeyyed and along the highway, so they get a call as soon as Hayk's units filter through the city in small detachments. It's not far past midnight, and gives the women in Kavkaz about an hour to grab their gear and get into position. They have rehearsed plenty, so most make it to their positions on time. A few forget their comms, or bring the wrong ammo, mistakes that will cost them dearly in the coming hours. At the same time, Tamar takes two small groups cutting cross-country to the east, and parallel to the Obeyyed highway. They'll be available for a diversion, if need be, or for mop-up, if things go well.

Brigade leaders also supervise the convoy of noncombatants streaming out of town by the north road, the side farthest from the highway. Some people won't leave, and instead take shelter in fortified basements.

The town dogs are still agitated as the lead unit of the Crusaders halts just south of town. The barking makes them nervous, but they see no lights or movement in town, and secure the stone bridge within minutes. A few shots pepper them, until a tank rolls up and blasts the nearest buildings. Behind them, troops drop from trucks and fan out into the fields and forests. Zimara, hidden with her unit between the creek and the highway, counts the trucks and multiplies. 140, 160 troops, she figures, and relays the estimate to her prihvadji. As is their usual practice, the Crusader heroes set up machineguns around the town, to cut down people fleeing the tanks. These squads are supposed to cover the town

evenly, but cluster mostly by the creek in the south; they don't much like long hikes in the dark, lugging forty kilos of massacre, and anyhow feel better closer to the tanks.

The Crusader artillery stop at the turnoff from the highway, and train the 155s on Kavkaz. The barrage starts at dawn. In fifteen minutes the Crusaders level Kavkaz's admin building, the police station, and the school, and have blasted the top floors of several of the buildings on the main square. They blow away several meters of the church tower, but that's by accident. Precision is not their priority.

Then four tanks move in, each followed by an APC. Their PA systems blare Crusader hymns to terrify the godless: *My Sword Bathed in Heaven, Drunk with Blood, Shoot at Her Spare No Arrows . . . .*

The Zimaras let the first two tanks cross the stone bridge before they blow it under the third. One side drops into the creek, along with the third tank; it ends up tilted awkwardly, belly exposed, turret grinding a few degrees back and forth, aimed at Arcturus. "I can take it! I can take it!" scratches the comm from the nearest RPG team, crouched in a basement.

"Hold!" Mandalika orders, as she tries to make out what's happening on her screen. She decides: "Leave it. Clear out the crew, leave the tank. That's going to be ours. Repeat: clear the crew, save the tank." Evidently the creek is finding its way inside, for suddenly the crew scramble out, into devastating gunfire from town.

Meanwhile the Brigade has bracketed the fourth tank with mortar rounds. That crew, too, chooses the better part of valor, and most of them make it to cover. Once the fourth tank is out of action, Emiliye's unit emerges from the fields to attack the artillery crew by the highway. The artillery guys don't expect the enemy so close; they are usually positioned well away from the action. Half die in the first ten minutes; the rest sprawl in the dirt, hands outstretched, motionless except for their lips. They beg for their lives.

Unable to turn back, the first two tanks head up the main road into town. At the end of the second block they come to a wide ditch cut across the road, with a high rubble barrier on the other side. The tanks start taking fire from the side alleys, over a jumble of parked cars. One tank peels off to the left, one to the right; they easily smash aside the flimsy barriers. The defenders scurry up the alley ahead of them and disappear around a corner.

The Zimaras have assigned eight mobile RPG teams to shadow the tanks on either side of the road. Two of these teams have the very dangerous job of shoot-and-run, deliberately drawing the tanks and APCs into the narrow lanes. Once the tanks have gone too far to turn around, the women hit them with rockets and automatic weapons from above, behind, and the sides. Some of the Zimaras fire from the third floors, some from basement windows, then hurry on to the next building through newly driven passageways. The tanks can't drop or elevate their cannon enough to return fire effectively. The watchers above shower the Crusaders with Molotov cocktails, at first not too accurately. When the APCs get splashed, though, the Crusader boys pile out in a hurry, spraying wildly with AK-47s.

The holy warriors run into the buildings to clear them out. They find they can get into the ground floors, but the stairways, back doors and windows have been bricked up. The Crusaders can't get to the Zimaras above and below. There are, however, grenade drops in the ceilings; these first floors become sealed blast zones. Some Crusaders make it out to the street again. They take off running back toward the bridge.

One of the tanks is disabled early on, tracks shattered, and set ablaze. The Zimaras hear the tank crew screaming; the turret pops open and someone waves a white flag. Nisibis tells her team and the one across the alley to stop firing. The Crusaders climb out and throw themselves on the pavement, beyond the reach of the flames. The gasoline burns another ten minutes, without setting off the munitions inside the tank.

The tank on the other side keeps going, followed by RPG teams running from one building to another, till a rocket penetrates and peels it open like aluminum foil.

Out on the perimeter, Mandalika's teams start taking out the Crusader machinegun crews by the creek. The trick is to knock them off one by one, without alerting the next crew a hundred meters away. Each of the women's teams has a weapon with a noise suppressor, so they overrun four positions before the Crusaders take alarm and start blazing away. But their weapons are set up to point in the wrong direction. By this time Emiliye's women have come up to support Mandalika's. Taking fire from two sides, the holy warriors bail out.

When the first batch of Crusaders come running from town, they expect supporting fire from the positions along the creek. Instead, they are cut down at close range.

On the far side of town, thirty Crusaders wait behind their guns for the people of Kavkaz to run terrified into the fire zone. They hear all sorts of destruction in town, but nobody comes running out. The threats and curses from their comms make no sense, and then stop. Shortly after that they see groups of women sprinting through the fields from the west, slipping from hillock to tree to ditch. Soon the Crusaders come under a light hail of gunfire, which they return with enthusiasm. Then a ripping noise, and an artillery shell drops nearby, and another. The Crusaders can't believe it. The women have artillery. Actually, it's only Zimara, playing with her new toys, and the captured gun crew, prodded unpleasantly by a hack-faced savage. From her cover outside the Crusader lines, Filipa comms in a halt to the bombardment a few minutes later. God's champions have fled.

Rusla and Renata have set up a makeshift clinic in the basement of the school, still relatively intact. Despite the advance warning, the artillery barrage has killed ten noncombatants huddling in their homes, and injured dozens more. Brigade fighters have gone down, too: one of the RPG teams in town didn't get out of the way fast enough, got hit by fire from the Crusader APCs. Another got trapped in a building, weakened earlier by artillery fire, when it collapsed under cannon fire from one of the tanks. Four women on the perimeter teams are hit by Crusader return fire; two die on the spot.

Gret and several of the Kavkaz women help with the wounded, and load them onto trucks when they're stabilized. Zimara has been in touch with New Start and the hospitals in Saray, and they will be ready when the wounded start arriving at nightfall.

The fighters collect surrendered Crusaders in the pit of what used to be the police station. Lieutenant Halevy walks among them, selecting officers to ship off to Saray; his pay for the weeks of training. Military interrogators will wring them dry, and then Kut will squeeze them again.

The rest are up for ransom; and before they are released, the women will shoot each in the foot. Crusader captains go to doctors and clinics in Djemdjad; the rank and file have four hundred saints to pray to. Sometimes the saints are otherwise occupied, in which case the injured soldiers are lost to the Crusade for months, and become a bitterly resented economic charge on their families. Crusading comes to seem a less attractive career path for the rural unemployed.

While the support teams are still bringing in the wounded, Zimara assembles the prihvadji. "Not done yet, my darlings. Who's up for a quick trip to Obeyyed?" Obeyyed! Biggest town on the Kulkhiz highway. Zimara has had it in mind all along. The adrenaline is still pumping; the women are ready. Hearing this, some of the Kavkaz women demand to go along, and this time Zimara agrees; she has Arasely arm ten of them. Forty women pile into a truck and two captured APCs. Mandalika stays behind to mind the clean-up at Kavkaz. It's not yet 10 AM on a sunny day. Columns of smoke rise to the sky.

Zimara has commed ahead. The spotter teams and Tamar's group along the highway have been picking off Crusaders as they limp back to Obeyyed two or three at a time. They find one guy huddling in a ditch, pretending to be dead; when they poke him hard, he stands with hands upraised and a big smile. "Don't shoot," he says. "I can help you. I am Captain Hayk."

Obeyyed itself has few defenders; most joined Hayk's expedition when it came through a few hours before. The soldiers remaining in Obeyyed hear through the comms about stiff resistance at Kavkaz, but

have no idea of the scope of the disaster. They are not prepared when the Zimaras blast through the checkpoint and speed into town.

Their target is the Crusader command post in the police station. They pour rockets and machinegun fire into the building, already much damaged from the initial Crusader attack months before. The Kavkaz women, having missed the morning's fight, seem determined to demonstrate their ferocity. After ten minutes Crusader boys tumble out with hands raised.

Then the women ransack the place, releasing prisoners and stealing comm, weapons and hard drives. They set alight the building itself and all the files inside. Another group crosses the plaza to similarly trash court records in the municipal palace.

All the while Zimara keeps comm in hand, listening for word from spotters outside Obeyyed, lest the Crusaders launch another force from the Kulkhiz border; but hears nothing. Instead, the women start to take fire from buildings near the plaza. The women shoot back, and for a few minutes the Crusader guns are silent; then they start again from another location, so the Zimaras have to keep cover.

Not much past noon Zimara reassembles the women. They commandeer a second truck to hold the loot. There are a couple APCs parked in the plaza; they take those too.

Some locals approach the Zimaras, very hesitantly. They want to go to Kavkaz.

"It's dangerous," Zimara tells them. "As you see, we are always under attack. And people who join us have to follow orders."

"We're under attack every day," one man gestures to the burning police station. "Crusade makes this hell on earth."

"We need transport," Zimara tells him.

"Five minutes," the guy replies. It's more like fifteen.

Six Obeyyed men and ten women go to Kavkaz with the Zimaras, driving an assortment of vans and pickups. In coming weeks many of their friends and relatives join them.

● Displeased

Totemish is at the dock when Archbishop Eddie gets to his boat. Father Antun carries fishing gear for the Archbishop and some of his cronies and their girlfriends. The women wear big hats and small bathing suits. They carry baskets of towels, chilled sandwiches, screen games and perfumed sun slather. A little man in overalls follows with a cartful of ice and liquor.

When Eddie sees the emissary from Clear Sparkling, he tells his guests, "Get lost." They are not too happy about it. Eddie and Totemish get into the boat and putt-putt into the harbor.

Dressed as if to wine and dine a big customer, Mr. Totemish nevertheless settles in very nicely next to the life jackets and the bait buckets. He signals his host to sit. "My employers are very concerned. They feel you have lost the initiative."

"If you'd gotten us the right codes, Skhrote would have dropped those planes."

"Our position is that the codes were fine. Someone on your end leaked where you got them. And you lost a town recently, isn't that right? On the main road to Kulkhiz." Totemish lifts one gleaming shoe while a smelly puddle rolls beneath it.

"There are setbacks in any war. God takes the long view."

"So do global corporations. We also look for results in real time. What do you think is the problem?"

Totemish listens a while to Nagahry's excuses, then cuts him off.

"We'd like to see you turn this around. The executive would rather not have to initiate alternative measures."

"We will fix this. A temporary faltering. I'm to meet with Brother Michael and the captains later this week," the Archbishop invents. "We'll sort this out."

"Good! We have full confidence. How can we help?"

Worried and angry, the Archbishop calls Commander Gloria. She is visiting her family in Besim Brod.

"I want you back here. I need you to kill me some atheists."

● Toys

The Zimaras use a 'dozer to pull the tank out of the creek; then they have to wait weeks for Rudeny Army techs to come and repair it. Two other tanks need repairs, too; the fourth, of course, is a total loss. In the meantime, volunteers head to Saray for tank training. As for the captured 155s, turns out that some of the men in Meeyadz and Kavkaz used to serve on gun crews (no one is so rude as to ask whether it was with the army or the Crusade), and are willing to teach; so the Zimaras can practice gunnery in their own back yard.

Another round of funerals. This time, for every Brigade member killed or quit, four women apply to join, and a growing influx of men. Most but not all of these come from towns and villages where the Collective has been operating in secret for months. Two villages on the coast where the Zimaras have never been ask for help setting up their own militias.

Zimara spends a week on the road with Arasely, meeting new members and visiting families of the slain. When she comes back she finds Rekady and fucks him with silent intensity. Afterward she tells him, "I don't ever want to see you dead."

"Good. Hadn't planned on it." He puts an arm over her shoulder. "What happened, Zee?"

Zimara mashes knuckles into her cheek. "I'm just tired."

"Fifty years from now, you'll be sick of me. You'll throw a party."

"Don't leave me behind."

"I'm not going anywhere. Tell me," he says, but she won't. She closes her eyes and curls into his shoulder. She knows with terrifying certainty that, of the two, it's she who will survive. Who can carry such grief?

● Misgivings

Colonel Kut has been intrigued by Zimara since first they met at the police station in Saray. At first, he liked her for the points he was winning with the generals from all the intell she provides. But he is even more aware of the p.r. potential of the women's defense movement; could be just the thing to reenergize the slack, rusty, barely competent government forces. So he starts to visit the Brigade often at the head of convoys of food and weapons, and makes sure to bring along a few journalists. There he is at the whiteboard in some dusty schoolhouse, explaining grand strategy to women warriors. There he is with the Senior Councillor herself, pulling ammo boxes from the back of trucks. At last a chance for the Saray government to establish a presence in the countryside. The politicians slowly wake up to this new peasant movement.

Doctor Avbury awaits the Colonel when he returns to Saray. "I urged Zimara to get government help, but now I regret it," she spits. "You are setting these women up as cannon fodder, to fight the battles your soldiers won't. And when your government falls apart, they will all be murdered."

Kut drops his comm on the desk and sits. "It's already way beyond that, Doctor. I don't think you realize the scale of what has been happening. Do you know, the Brigade has hundreds on the rolls already, and more arrive at their camps every day— men and women both. They've got village defense

units in four provinces. Now the army is sending out its own teams, and finding people everywhere willing to fight, if they feel they have a fighting chance.

"The government won't fall. But even if it did, the Zimaras will outlast it. What concerns the big shots in Saray is what to do with the Brigade *after* the war."

“They don’t want another militia running around.”

“Or several. What if the Brigade splinters? Then these unit leaders —prihvadji, they call them— they’ve gotten used to pushing people around, they don’t want to go back to the farm— they’d be tempted to set up as local warlords. We have seen it before,” Kut says.

“But you don’t think that will happen.”

“Neither do you. So you tell me the reasons.”

Avbury has to think about it. She calms down a bit. “First, we’ve never had so many women taking part before. For the most part women have not been trained to bullying and corruption, though certainly we are fast learners. The main insurance is, women fighters can never fit into the old clan and gang organizations.”

“And?”

“And they are developing relationships that span the nation. These men and women come from fifty towns and villages, and trust each other with their lives. They are building a broader set of loyalties. At least I hope so.”

“New Start can take some credit for that.”

“And all these fine dreams blow away like smoke from a candle when the Crusaders kill them all.”

“You got some of the Kavkaz casualties.”

“A lot.”

“How many years, how many countries have you done the refugee thing? All those wars. But this is the first time you’ve taken sides, isn’t it? People you want to protect. It’s a different kind of responsibility.

“But please remember, they could have stayed at New Start. Zimara and the others— this is what they chose to do, and they have good reason.”

● Chain of Command

“Is that— ?”

“The very,” Nagahry tells Torkim.

Hard to mistake the handsome, rugged face below the helmet of white hair so gleaming and flawless it might have been laquered. Chiseled mug and porcelain coif adorn the walls of countless living rooms, between crucifix and the Day-Glo portrait of a porky Madonna and Child. He is the prime minister of Kulkhiz— a prop, a beard, a codpiece stuffed with toilet paper to front for the ruling generals. Today he presides genially from a patio chair by a folding table at the gates to the Admiral’s pool, handing out nametags.

“Hi, Eddie.”

“Manny.” The Archbishop tilts his head. “This is Torkim.”

The P.M. nods to each visitor with the same dignified economy he shows in government— the less said, the less chance to screw up. Manny wears sky-blue swim trunks with his initials stitched in gold along the seams, and the same designer shades he models at every press conference and parade. It’s a little shocking to see him bereft of sash and medals. His bare chest and arms are as tanned as his face, regardless of season. Not bad for an old guy, you can tell he works out. The visiting clerics paste their nametags to their shirt pockets.

"Here's your pool pass. I'd wait til later. The boys clear out at dinner time." The Prime Minister refers to the glistening flock of young captains and lieutenants now wrestling and splashing in the Admiral's pool, a blue-green gem between blue spruce forests above and the green of the distant sea. Kulkhiz' leaders have learned from the errors of their brethren across the border, and make sure to keep their junior officers sleek and sated. Manny has set a radio on the flagstone at his feet, antenna stretched to snatch the latest in Turkish pop.

"And our gracious host?"

Manny jerks a thumb over his shoulder.

"Whyn't you stay here?" Nagahry tells the Abbot. "Take a few laps around the pool."

"Eddie— "

"I'll call if I need you. Meanwhile, keep your ears open. Right? Find out what the soldier boys have on their tiny minds. Manny, can you point him to the lockers?" The Archbishop leaves his underling standing downcast by the pool, red ticket in one hand.

Beyond the sprawling terraces and balconies of his palace, the Admiral strolls bareheaded through his prize gardens, tall and warty, trailed by a retinue of the country's players. It's the military who rule Kulkhiz, and first among equals is this year's Chief of Staff, Vice Admiral Vraymn. Senior officials and officers take turns for a chance for a few words with their paragon. By and by Vraymn summons Archbishop Nagahry to walk with him. It's a rare audience for the Rudeny holy man.

"Try this," says the Admiral, handing Nagahry a lobed yellow fruit freckled red.

Nagahry prefers political adventures. He barely breaks the skin with his teeth. The Admiral stops to watch the experiment. Nagahry smiles and takes a big bite. Instantly a creamy foam floods his mouth, triggering a corresponding gush of saliva. It's not so much a taste as a biochemical trigger.

"Fantastic, isn't it?" The Admiral resumes walking. "Family Sapotaceae. Very rare, this variety. I had it brought from Madagascar." He turns to look at the Archbishop. "Take care about the seeds, though. Couple of those will stop your heart." Nagahry pauses in mid-chew, trying not to swallow. He gazes into the distance as his tongue finds the rough seeds. With a glance at the Admiral, he spits them into his fist. A peachy drool festoons the corner of his mouth.

"So what do you hear from Hidris?" the Admiral asks. He waits patiently while Nagahry swallows the pulp in small careful gulps.

"As you know, the devil has been busy."

"Modrek" —Vraymn disdains Brother Michael's campaign name— "Modrek should have pushed harder when he had air immunity. These strategic advantages never last."

"He hasn't had your depth of experience, but he learns fast." Nagahry drops his hand to his side and lets go the yellow fruit, and wipes sticky hands on the seat of his pants, without success.

"He doesn't know the most important thing, which is loyalty." The Kulkhiz military were less than pleased to hear that Brother Michael killed his former boss and Vraymn's Rudenyan counterpart, General Sikert.

"He does seem to take his obligations rather lightly." Michael's ethical flexibility is the one characteristic the Archbishop admires, but Nagahry doesn't mind dishing him to third parties.

"A man who raises his hand against his superior . . . ."

"Our Heavenly Father tells us to stone to death a disobedient son. I know, it's a disturbing sign. But the Brother has many other valuable qualities."

"For instance, what happened to the money?" Once he gets an idea, the Admiral worries it like a dog at a rabbit hole. He strides impatiently in a big loop about the estate; the Archbishop skips like a schoolgirl to keep up. Gradually they leave behind the other petitioners.

"The artifacts, yes. You know as much as I do. Doctor Sevik has been reaching out to the dealer networks. They've sold several pieces for a good price, I'm told . . . ."

The Admiral interrupts: "Where's the money?"

“Tell the truth, I’m a bit frustrated myself. Doctor Sevik has some rather odd ideas about the origins of the Hoard, and I fear he may be more focussed on proving his theories than on making these resources available for the Lord’s work,” Nagahry explains. “Still, we’re dealing with a market new to us. It makes sense for us to proceed with care.” He gestures to the group behind them. “I brought Abbot Torkim. He’s been keeping a close eye on the proceedings at Rudomil. If you’d like to talk to him yourself . . . .”

Vraymn waves his hand angrily. “Tens of millions, you told us.”

“Maybe more. The first responses have been very favorable. Deals like this take time, though, because everything has to be authenticated, and because of the, ah, restrictions on moving these things around.”

“You need to go faster.”

“Sevik says his dealers are worried about crashing the market. We want to get the best prices, yes?”

The Admiral shakes his head. His jowls follow soon thereafter. “Maximum prices won’t do us any good if we have to close up shop. The longer this goes on, the more likely the AATC is to catch wind of it. Once the world hears the Hoard is real, our government will have to step in. We can’t be seen exporting the national heritage.”

“We’ve got a lot in the pipeline already. Shouldn’t be much longer. A few months at most.”

“Too risky. I’ve talked to my colleagues.” Vraymn pokes the Archbishop in the chest. “You tell Sevik to dump the lot.”

“Now? Right away?” Nagahry doesn’t want to get caught between gluttonous Crusaders and their gluttonous host— might lose a finger, or an arm. “Perhaps you could talk to the Doctor yourself,” he suggests. “More persuasive.”

The Admiral stops and stares at him. “What’s your job?”

“My job?” No one has ever asked him this question before. He has plenty of titles. His job? “I suppose you could say I’m preparing the way for the success of the Crusade.”

“No, your job. What do you do— you personally?”

Nagahry answers carefully. “I like to think that when we retake Saray, I can serve the new government. Of course my priority is to strengthen for all time the ancient alliance between Rudeny and Kulkhiz.”

“That’s years away at best. That’s not what I asked. You better see to the job you have right now.” He means messenger boy, pedaling his tricycle from one warlord to the next. With a flick of his chin, Vraymn dismisses the Archbishop, and waves forward another politician.

As Nagahry and Abbot Torkim reach the gates on their way out, a young officer comes running up with a coarse cloth bag. It’s full of fresh fruit from the Admiral’s orchard, juicy prizes from around the world. On the drive back to Djemdjad Nagahry tosses them out the window, one by one.

● Gifts

For Gret's birthday Zimara makes a jacket embroidered with rosettes, tendrils, spirals and waves. It takes weeks and she leaves it with Arasely so Gret won't see it unfinished.

"It's gorgeous, mom!" says Gret on the day. Zimara has always been pretty good at this craft. This time she has outdone herself.

Rekady likes it too and tells Zimara he wants one.

"Long time since I’ve done men's style."

"You are Senior Councillor. Make me something— everyone will be impressed."

When Gret sees Rekady's jacket, she is afraid he won't like it. "Flowers are for women."

Zimara asks, "Really? How do you know?"

"Men can't wear flowers," Gret insists.

Zimara points to some of the bordering. "See here? You find this on men's masks."

Gret is troubled. "You've mixed them up."

"I guess I have. But I like it. And I think Rekady will like it fine."

● Expedite

Sevik doesn't like it. "That pig Nagahry. We're going to lose a lot of money. You've got to talk to Vraymn."

"Eddie's just the messenger. And the Admiral doesn't invite me to his house parties. They're still pissed I knocked off Sikert." Michael and the Doctor stroll the parapet at Rudomil, just at twilight. A mass of thunderclouds boil up out of Rudeny, limned red by the setting sun.

"Then call Judge Hokh. He's a smart guy."

"I'll do it, but anything I tell him goes straight to Eddie Nagahry." He spits over the wall and watches the stringy glob loop through the air. "I doubt they'll change their minds. They're afraid the operation is going to blow up on them. They figure cash in hand is better than more cash later— maybe. You've got to turn out the product."

"We can speed it up, but there's a limit."

"Pump it out to Faul's dealers, fast as you can. Fire sale."

"We've got to clean it all first, don't we? You've seen the photos. Right now most of this stuff is just a mass of rust and grime. Some of these pieces are no more than sharp-edged twists of metal, maybe three or four artifacts crushed into each other. How can we sell them before we clean and package them?"

"Then get a move on. Light a fire under Kvek."

"He'll need help."

"Get it. We want stupids. People we won't need later, understand?"

"I know who."

"I'll talk to Hokh. We'll want a ship."

"And trucks to Djemdjad, and no port officials snooping around."

Yesenya and Vlasta watch from Sky Land, hands cupping their chins, and wonder what the Crusader chiefs are up to. Then Nika calls them, and they go back to their game.

● Daydream

Damyana wonders what life will be like after the war. She pictures a cozy cottage in a meadow, and two women working side by side in the sunshine. One is short and strong, the other tall and blonde. The tall one wipes her pretty brow and leans to one side, to rest her head on the other's shoulder. Damyana imagines sun, sweat, flowers, bees, the smell of the dirt . . . one thing only she will not think about, at all.

§ BURN

● New Boss

Filipa can't reach Yesenya. She is walking mountain trails below Hidris when she calls Zimara. "They've moved her and we can't find out where."

"Check with Taline, or Vlasta. They'll know."

"They're gone, too. Comm signal puts Yesenya somewhere inside the monastery. They used to bring them back to town every night, but the signal has not moved in days."

"Think Konsta might know?"

"I doubt it. Yesenya told me he hardly sees her anymore. And his unit is not due back for weeks."

"I'll see if Kut can get a fix on the signal. I want you to use all our contacts there to figure how to get past the gates. If she's still got the comm Yesenya will call. Meanwhile, stay safe."

The girl calls Zimara two days later. At first Zimara hears only a faint sniffling sound.

"Yesenya? Yesenya, talk to me." Zimara strains to hear. After a moment, a very small voice:

"Can you come get us now, Zee?"

"What's happening, cousin? What have they done?" Yesenya doesn't answer.

"Darling girl, I need you to tell me where you are. We've been looking for you."

The girl sniffs. Her voice firms up a little. "You know the scriptorium?"

"I don't, but I can find it on the map you made."

Yesenya is speaking from the bathroom of her new dormitory, once the monastery's brewery, but the place she fears is where they bring her to work. "We work under the scriptorium, a big room with no windows. They take us down a lot of steps to get there. It's dirty and wet and smelly." A stifled wail escapes. "They are so mean! Kvek yells all the time, and it's not our fault. They bring us back up after midnight office and lock us in at the brewery. We can never go to Sky Land. It's so hard!"

"I see it on your map. They put you underground?"

"That guy Sevik, he's the worst."

"Sevik!"

"We have to call him Doctor, but I don't think he's a doctor."

"Who's there with you?"

"Nika and Vlasta and Taline, and two others from Vyolka's place."

"Good. You're together. Now, tell me about this work."

"I don't understand it. It's all these beautiful cups and crowns and statues. Gold, a lot of it."

"Are they stealing from the churches?"

"I don't think so. It doesn't look anything like church stuff."

"How can that be?"

"I don't know. We bring it up from caves and clean each piece. They take pictures, and then we have to wrap it all up very nice. They load it on trucks and send it away. They act so weird about it."

Zimara stays silent for a moment. "Say more about the trucks." Filipa might be able to find Yesenya by tracking the vehicles.

"It's the drink company. You know, the pouring rainbow."

"Clear Sparkling."

"Yes."

Makes sense: the Clear Sparkling water delivery trucks. They go everywhere, even into the war zone. The sturdy adjustable racks can carry a couple tons of sugar water— or just about anything else.

"I have to get off," Yesenya whispers. "I'm afraid they'll see me."

"Can you get pictures of the crowns and statues?"

"They search us every day when we leave. It's not nice. I could bring the comm down there, but then I couldn't bring it back."

"OK, never mind that. As long as you have the comm, we can find you."

"I have to go now," Yesenya says. "I hate this place."

Sevik has put Yesenya and the other girls in the old monks' brewery, out of use for a generation but still stinking of stale beer. Besides the Skylanders Sevik took two others from the women's barracks: loud Gabriyela, subdued now, and a big-eyed spooky girl named Mihaela. The girls have laid out sleeping pads on the floor amid wood and metal vats and cylinders, some suspended on frames reaching almost to the high ceiling. A stairway at the far end of the building rises to tool rooms and an office perched above ground-floor storage space.

Yussup runs the place. He's a scary old man missing part of his jaw— no one knows what happened. He warbles words no one can understand, but among the wrenches, gloves, rolls of wire, and tins of glue and solvent in the baggy pockets of his trousers he carries a wad of crumpled paper and a pencil stub that he sharpens by biting away the tip. Yussup has big hands, with clumsy fingers swollen like sausages about to split, and a streak of hairless white runs from one hand up under his sleeve. He writes short messages in a surprisingly delicate and careful cursive. The girls and the guards assume he is someone's idiot uncle, given this job as a favor. He shops, cooks, and cleans for Sevik's cleaning crew. They don't know what he does during the day when they're working. He carries a heavy ring with old-fashioned iron keys, many more than this building requires. He keeps it locked until one of Sevik's thugs bangs on the door.

Every morning they escort the girls across the courtyard and down long passageways under the old scriptorium, into the network of vaulted chambers that once held the monastery's water supply. Rusty water runs across the floor with every rain, and green slime coats the base of the walls. But the place is out of sight, and that's what Sevik needs. Here he has established a workroom to pack up Rudomil's long-hidden treasures. Delicate and gleaming or coarse and broken artifacts threaten to spill from shelves and plastic bins. Soaking tubs line one wall, amid boxes of rags and brushes and polish, and fifty-liter drums of solvent. A heavy faucet protrudes from one wall, with a leaky hose attached. Cylinders of heavy paper and bubble wrap totter among long tables piled with scissors and tape; the tape is for the girls' hands as well as for the packages, to protect against chemicals and sharp edges. Even so their fingerprints abrade away within days.

A little studio occupies one corner, with cables and cameras and bright lights, where Professor Kvek documents each object before it's wrapped. Off to one side there's a tiny chamber with a single light and a pit straddled by a pair of boards; that's where the girls piss and shit. A big fan in the main chamber aerates the place but does not diminish the stink. At the far end they have fitted a gate of steel bars into a hole in the wall. Beyond that, a precarious stairway leads to caves deeper in the mountain, where from time to time the girls must go to fetch more of the Hoard of the Khazars.

The girls meet Sevik and Professor Kvek the first day. "You do what the Professor tells you," Sevik says. "This work is very important. We are sending gifts to every church in Rudeny. Isn't that nice? Imagine when they open their packages one day. Won't they be surprised!" Sevik picks a stunning silver chain off the shelf, a flight of geese linked wingtip to wingtip, and holds it up for the girls to admire. "And for your best work," he continues, "we'll let you choose one gift to keep. The professor will put it aside, here on this shelf, won't you, Professor? And if he tells me you've done a good job, when we're finished you can take it home with you. Now isn't that a nice thing, girls?"

Right away Taline wants to know, "What if I choose something now and then I see something else I want instead? Can I change my mind?"

Sevik answers with the kindest smile. "Of course. Whatever you wish. But you have to do a good job for us."

Kvek sets the girls to work fetching, cleaning, polishing and wrapping coins, helmets, drinking horns, buckles, book plaques, cauldrons, armlets, amulets . . . what's left of three centuries of grab by the Khazar kings, now mostly tarnished and twisted metal, with some old scraps of silk, leather, wood and ivory. Flecks of paint still cling to some of the pieces. Some are stunning even as they first come to light; with others it's only after the crew has removed layers of rust and grime that the imagination and skill of the artisans shines through. Kvek has a cabinetful of tools to help him restore these treasures, but he's had little experience, certainly not with such magnificent artifacts, and after a few unfortunate experiments he contents himself with only the most superficial changes. The collectors who buy these pieces will be plenty rich enough to restore them properly.

He has the girls dip the most delicate pieces in a special wax before they wrap and box them. The Professor fusses at them constantly the first week, until they do the work to his satisfaction. After that, he spends most of his time measuring and imaging the most important pieces, which are not always the most beautiful. Sevik will use these files to prove his claims about early Christianity. Kvek will write the breakthrough chapter on the Khazar empire and publish it secretly, someday. Meanwhile he cherishes the privilege of seeing what hundreds of his colleagues would envy.

A couple more join the happy crew, Sevik's manglers Plekh and Nimmatob, old timers with Submit to the Lord. Nimma mostly sits by the entry playing screen games. At the end of the day Plekh arrives, and the two search the girls, poking and joking unpleasantly. Then they lead the girls back to the brewery. Sometimes it's Flem who comes by. The girls can tell he's a big shot by the way the other men, including the Professor, defer to him.

Sevik has had a loading dock built into one side of the scriptorium, and every couple of weeks the girls haul up the boxes and load them onto the Clear Sparkling trucks. Then they descend into the narrow fetid caves, lit by a single string of light bulbs, and fetch more of the Khazar artifacts to the workroom.

Doctor Sevik stops in a couple times a week, to consult with Kvek or just to watch the girls for a while. Kvek gives him a data slot with the latest inventory, and sometimes mentions particular items to look for. Sometimes Sevik just stands by the door, smoking. Then he leaves without a word.

They see the Abbot less frequently. Torkim takes care not to show up when Sevik's there. Torkim's main job, of course, is to watch and report to Eddie Nagahry. But he also likes to gawk. "To think no one has seen this for centuries," he might say, handling a tarnished fragment of an astrolabe. He and the Professor get into vehement debates about what a particular object might mean or be used for. The Abbot is talking through his hat, and knows it; mostly he just wants to provoke the Professor. In this way the girls are treated to a series of university lectures on Pontic archaelogy. They listen intently as they bend to their work. It makes these lovely or bizarre objects all the more interesting. It makes them wonder, too, about Sevik's story that these are merely gifts to churches. They worry that he might take back their prizes.

• Sightseeing

Kut and the bandit queen confer by comm about the work Yesenya described. The Colonel thinks Yesenya must be exaggerating, but Zimara relates to him the curious request by Avbury's donor. "I doubt Avbury will tell you her name, but what my cousin described might be part of this lost treasure the American mentioned."

"Loaded onto Clear Sparkling trucks."

"That's what Yesenya said. Is that important?"

"Well, it's strange. You remember Katerin sent us those photos from the power station? Turns out those two guys they saw belong to Clear Sparkling."

"A soft drinks company?"

"Clear Sparkling controls water systems, whole river basins, in a dozen countries. They've got some kind of deal going with the Kulkhiz generals, we don't know yet quite what. Makes me wonder if they're dealing now with the Crusade as well."

"Why would they keep it secret?"

"That's what I want to know."

When the Colonel tells Djordjevich about his sightseeing plans, the Lieutenant objects. "They know you in Djemdjad. Send me."

"When you get to be boss, you can assign yourself the fun jobs. Anyway, you think I'd let them see me?"

"A veritable bastard of disguise."

"Look at it this way. I end up the wrong end of Sevik's cattle prod, you get to run the show here. Come to think if it," Kut adds suspiciously, "maybe I oughtn't share with you my travel plans."

The Lieutenant puts a hand to his heart. "Yellow ribbons only till you come back safe."

● Sevik in Love

Seems our Doctor Sevik has taken a fancy to Sky Land President Taline. A decent, hardworking yet cheerful and mischievous Christian girl. Sevik can see how the other girls look up to her. If he hadn't murdered his mom he'd bring Taline home to meet her. He is stirred by her brown eyes, the damp forelock that tumbles from her kerchief and the way she purses her lips in concentration. She must be lonely, poor girl, like himself far from home and family. He believes she needs encouragement, so he takes to praising her work and patting her on the shoulder. She slides from his touch without changing expression. He has to cup her chin to make eye contact— such charming modesty! One evening he asks her to stay behind when the others leave. He has a special job for her, he says.

When the Skylanders come back without Taline, Yussup goes looking for her. The gates to the underground workshop are locked, so he heads over to the Tower of Penance. Of course the guards won't let him in, but he can see lights on in Sevik's rooms above his office. Soon the Submit men chase him away.

Sevik brings Taline back after midnight. Taline laughs when Yesenya asks her where she's been. Taline starts cutting her arms.

Yesenya tells Zimara about the cuts on Taline's arms.

"Who is hurting her?"

"I think she does it herself. Zimara, something bad is happening."

● Scandalized

Sex is on Damyana's mind, too. There is a pocket forest behind Barracks B where people go for privacy. They stalk away when they see Damyana coming, tucking in their shirts, and soon she doesn't see them there any more. She sniffs around until she finds the new place, an old van listing to one side at the back of the car park. "They don't even bother to hide it. I feel it endangers my salvation," she tells the priest.

Father Karastepan too worries about sex among the women. It has tormented him for a long time. Now he can see it harms the straight women, too. He resolves to take it up with Zimara. She listens politely, and invites him to share his concern at the next meeting of the Council.

"It's not healthy, for their bodies or their souls. And it offends the townspeople," he concludes.

The prihvadji take turns berating him. The priest is shocked, and bitter. "You set me up," he accuses Zimara next day.

"You set yourself up," she replies. “You live with us for months, and still you don’t know we don’t tell women how to live their lives?”

After a prayerful night he comes to Zimara with an anguished note of resignation. She doesn't even look at it.

"Tell me, what did you come here to do?”

“God forgive me, I thought I could help. Truly I did. But I can’t be part of this. . . this. . . “

Zimara waits coldly for him to finish the sentence, but he doesn’t dare say the words. So she asks, “What? Priests never have sex?”

“We try not to.”

“I see. You never touch yourself.”

Karastepan blushes, but he has vowed to stand up to her bullying. “That’s different.”

“Sure it is. That way you cut yourself off from other people.”

“But that’s my point. You say sex is a private matter, but it affects others.”

“I don’t say that. Everything we do affects others. And we try very hard to minimize the harm we do. We’re careful where we shit, how much we take a mealtimes, who we put at risk, and how we think about people who are different from us. We work hard to overcome our fears and all the lies they have hammered into our heads.

“More important, we try our best to help each other. Sometimes we die for each other. Now you want me to drive from our community one of the things that binds us together in joy. Kashleek, you must be crazy!”

“All I’m asking is a little self-restraint.”

“Next you’ll tell us to stop eating. I know a lot of husbands, a lot of bosses who would like that.”

“You know that’s not what I mean. There have to be rules,” he insists.

“We make rules all the time— to serve us. And when they don’t serve us any more, we change them. Those ugly demands made long ago by landowners and slaveowners and owners of women— we shit them down the toilet, along with the greed and hate and their perverted need to control.”

Exasperated, the priest pulls out the argument he knows Zimara has the least patience for. “I know you don’t care, but God says— “

“God says a lot of things. He says burn down cities and kill everyone inside. He says kill every first child. He says punish children for the sins of their great grandfathers. He says, better let your neighbors rape your daughters than to have sex with other men. You’re right. I don’t give a damn about your god.

"You think you can’t stand it any more,” she continues, unrelenting. “You think you have sacrificed enough. You are hungry and cold and tired of the bullets whining past. But just now we require of each other the real sacrifice: to change ourselves. Each of us carries the corruption of the corrupt place we came from. We have to shed it to make something better. I think you can do it.

“So I don't recognize your resignation. I want you to be part of this, part of us, Kashleek. I ask you again. What did you come here to do? Are you here to help us, or are you just collecting stars for your heavenly crown? Do you even see us, really see us? Check with Jesus. And come back when you know."

Karastepan comes back once more, black bag in hand. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. But I have to go. Someday . . . . Can I come back sometime?”

“I’m sad to see you go,” Zimara says.

The priest never returns. Instead, he organizes a cell in Saray, and sends the Brigade news and recruits. A One True shoots him a couple years later, enraged that a man of God should so betray his calling.

Damyana is scandalized when she hears Karastepan has left. How can Zimara treat the priest so disrespectfully? He was the only person she could talk to about her worries. The only person in Kavkaz, anyway.

• Pray Forgiveness

Sevik doesn't like to see the slashes on Taline's arms, and scolds her about them. She smiles sweetly and promises she'll stop, and cuts more. He tries to bribe her with bits of jewelry from the Hoard— Taline thanks him with a kiss, and leaves them behind when she leaves the tower. After that Sevik won't take her shirt off.

Every time he rapes her, Sevik kneels down afterward to pray. "I'm a sinner, Lord, a weak man beset by temptation. Forgive me, Jesus," he begs, and Jesus always does. The Doctor sees to it that Taline begs forgiveness, too, for being such a slut. "I suppose you can't help it," he tells her affectionately, and curls her forelock in his fingers.

It's lonely for a man with such big responsibilities. Sometimes Sevik doesn't let Taline go till morning. As he paws her, Sevik tells the girl, "You know, I envy you your simplicity and innocence. You have no idea how stressful it is to be running a Crusade."

"You poor man," Taline says. "It must be so hard, to have so many men counting on you." She listens as the Doctor boasts about his big plans, and complains about the incompetents who conspire to thwart him. He falls asleep towards morning. Taline stays awake, trying to remember everything he's told her.

• Tip-Off

At this point Married to Jesus consists of five women cleaning and cooking for their brothers and husbands. Mladenka is loud, boastful and lazy. Radaysha is decorative and does what she's told. Gloria keeps asking the others their names, and keeps forgetting.

The men are here to keep an eye on this stupid enterprise. If Jesus thinks Married to Jesus means the husbands have to give up the dowries —money which they by God have earned twice over for putting up with these silly twits— Jesus better think again. And that bitch Gloria, who does she think she is?— coming between a man and his wife like that.

Well, it's not all bad. The Commander pays well, and whenever they get bored they just pile into the ol' pickup and drive through a village shooting dogs, pigs, and people. Of course it's the women, with glamorous Gloria in the center, who adorn the Married to Jesus website. Their uniforms include high boots, pink scarves and burning heart pendants.

For some time now Gloria has tried to interest her little death squad in more daring operations against the Women's Brigade, but it's thanks no thanks. The men aren't having any. Why should they go up against people with guns when the pickings are so easy elsewhere?

Sevik won't give them the time of day, so Gloria has to find her own intelligence sources. Her pals in the neofascist media offer her all sorts of suggestions, but it's not until Damyana comes on line that practicable targets come into focus. Not knowing about Flem's earlier troubles —he has taken care not to advertise— Gloria thinks the Rudeny government health survey is just what she is looking for.

"They are sending abortionists all over the country, poisoning people's minds and turning them against God. A lot of foreigners," Damyana says. Damyana tells the Jihadi Dolly where the medical teams will be and when, and who from the Brigade will escort them. "Something you ought to know. The escort teams always send scouts ahead before the med teams arrive."

"How will I recognize them?"

"I don't know who they'll send, but the best idea is not to interfere. Stay out of town. Let the scout comm the all-clear." Damyana has learned a lot in her time with the Brigade. Time for God to stop shilly-shallying around.

When Gloria runs it by the Archbishop, he cautions, "Didn't work out so well with Flem," and tells her the details.

Gloria is scornful. "Flem is corrupt. His eyes are full of money. You know that's not me. When I go after the medicos, I'll just kill them."

"That's my girl." The Archbishop is really very fond of his little terrorist. He likes to think of her as a simple soul, direct, a savage innocent; a beautiful pet, stupid but loyal, and dangerous to his enemies. (As it happens, Commander Gloria thinks of the Archbishop in much the same way, minus the fondness.)

In the event, though, the men in Gloria's unit won't kill the foreign doctors, except one they shoot by accident. Just too much money to be made from ransom.

• Working Conditions

For all his domestic bliss, Sevik does not restrain his temper, at least not with the girls of the clean-up crew. Taline bears the brunt of his impatience— a public figure such as himself can't be seen to play favorites. But the other children suffer as well.

Kvek has been letting Vlasta bring Emrush to work. Usually the toddler sits under a table, making motor noises and pushing around scraps of debris. One day, as Sevik watches idly, Emrush totters over to a shelf and pulls down a trayful of ceremonial drinking cups. They bounce off his head and clatter to the floor. More surprised than hurt, Emrush starts bawling. Sevik, startled, claps his hands to his ears. Before Vlasta can get him Sevik has Emrush by the throat. The man lifts the little boy as if about to dash him against the wall. He slaps Vlasta away when she reaches for her brother. The other girls stop working, horrified.

Taline rushes to the Doctor and hugs him around the waist, pressing her cheek to his scrawny chest. "Not in front of the girls, Lover," she says. "That's it, let him go. You big bad man," she says, and smiles, and shakes her finger at him.

"Get him out of here," Sevik snarls. From then on, Yussup keeps Emrush during the day. Sevik stays away for days following this little scene.

Then there's the incident with the lunch pails. Yussup has been sending the girls to work with vegetable wraps and a packet of tea, which they boil up in a pot they keep on a small stove. The Submit guard Nimmatob gets hungry midmornings and goes through their lunches, eating what he likes. At lunch the girls pool what's left, so that no one has nothing at all to eat. They complain once to Kvek, but he takes one look at the guard and tells the girls not to bother him. The Professor always leaves at mid-day, to chow down in the refectory with the monks.

One day, as the girls unwrap their food, Nimmatob spots a tasty delight he missed earlier, a roll of fried bread filled with pecans. He snatches it from Yesenya's hands and chomps it once, twice— gone. Mouth full, he grins at the girl, to see what she'll do. She smiles back.

"Here, Nimma, you take it," Yesenya says, and pushes the rest of her food toward him, and points to the belly hanging over his belt. "You need it more than I do."

"Sure," he says, and takes the lot, just to show he can't be bluffed.

The other girls offer Yesenya their portions, but she waves them away, never taking her eyes off the guard. Nika chews slowly, watching, then pushes the rest of her food away.

"Here, Nimma, have some more."

He looks at her uneasily. He's still chewing Yesenya's food. "Nah," he says, his mouth full, "maybe tomorrow, beautiful."

Nika pushes her meal a couple inches further, till it tumbles to the floor. Now it's all dirty, inedible, smeared with grease and metal chips. She gets up and goes back to her workbench. Yesenya gets up, and goes back to work. The other girls take a last bite, and push their food to the floor, and get back to work.

"Now you clean that up," Nimmatob demands, but they won't look at him. He's not sure what to do. Beating all of them seems like a big project.

"What the hell is this?" Kvek complains when he sees the spilled food. All he gets from the guard is that much practiced Kill you, muh-fuh look, and the girls merely grin as they bend to their work. Kvek mutters, and shakes his head. Just another craziness in this crazy place.

Next morning as they leave the brewery, trudging behind the two guards, the girls carefully tip their lunch pails onto the cobblestones of the courtyard. The Submit men don't notice until later, when there's no food for them to steal. Makes them mad, but who are they going to complain to?

The caretaker Yussup has an office upstairs in the back. He sleeps there on a cot. Sevik makes him give the space to Taline. A fastidious man, Sevik doesn't want want her consorting with the other girls after work. They are so dirty, who knows what kind of germs they carry?

When Sevik's not around, Yussup lets Taline stay with the other girls. He rigs a camera over the outside doorway, so that when Sevik bangs on the door, Taline has thirty seconds to get up the stairs and into the Doctor's love nest. Sometimes Sevik forces her right there. Yussup takes to sitting on the walkway outside the office door, so that Sevik has to step over him on the way out. After that Sevik mostly takes the girl to his own offices in the Tower of Penance.

• One More Stop

At first light the medical team loads up the trucks parked on a narrow stone drive between shambling stone buildings and the rocky river. Doctor Otavio paws through a box because he can't remember whether he packed the new antibiotics. Poscheel and others of the Brigade escort unit pore over a map spread out on the hood of one of the pickups, while Doctor Nzangiye dickers with the drivers.

"Hadzych— too far," Bashkim says in English.

"You didn't say 'too far' when we started," Nzangiye counters. "You said, 'Let's go.'"

Milan grins and holds out his hand. "Hundred Euro, let's go."

Nzangiye shrugs. "Fifty Euro, let's go, yes?" The drivers pull this nearly every trip, and the Doctor has already built it into his budget.

They have been on the road nearly a month and everyone is tired and fretful. Last night a minor collision cost them a car and two of Poscheel's group, who are going to wait here with minor injuries until they can catch a ride to Saray. Poscheel herself sports a rainbow bruise to the forehead, but she figures it's going to hurt whether she stays or goes, so she's going. Three more days, one more stop, then they can go back to Saray.

Geir the nurse asks Miryam, "Is that right, what the drivers said about Hadzych?"

"What— that they were attacked again last month? That's true, but the Crusaders didn't stay. The place is too poor and remote. Other than that, we don't know much about it. The Brigade has no network there, and neither does the government, which is the other reason they sent us. They want to establish a presence."

Poscheel adds that Mateya got back last night from Hadzych and gave the all clear. She shrugs. "Don't mean things can't change fast."

"As far as we know, Hadzych hasn't seen a nurse or doctor in years," Otavio interjects. "So we are likely to see a backlog of malnutrition and skin disease, and a lot of people disabled by injury and childbirth and botched home surgeries. Not much you'll find useful back in Sweden."

"I'm on vacation," says Geir. "Doesn't have to be useful."

"Main thing is, keep our eyes open when we get there," Poscheel reminds them. "We're not sure what to expect. Our contact people leave suddenly, so do we."

Rzen's newly minted Health Committee marches down the road, led by a young man in old man's clothes. He is the mayor. They carry boxes and baskets of fish balls, pilaf, moussaka, cookies, pastries . . . Nzangiye has promised to come back to set up a clinic here. They want to make sure he does not forget. They wave enthusiastically until the medical team drives out of sight.

• Lost

Gabriyela coughs so much at night she can barely sleep, and she keeps the others awake, too. All the girls develop rashes on their hands and forearms.

Yussup notes the Skylanders barely eat, except for Emrush, as he sits in Vlasta's lap. Next day Yussup, a careless eater himself, puts more thought into preparing the meals, and buys more meat as an enticement. The Skylanders take his efforts as a challenge, and after a couple token bites, sit back and push their food around. As an experiment, Yussup gets up from the table early and goes to the stairwell at the far end of the building, and opens the door just enough to watch. The girls seem to relax a little, and take a few bites more, but once Emrush stops eating and wanders off, the girls get up and clear away the supper, mostly uneaten.

Crafty Yussup buys a sack full of sweet cakes and hard candy, and hides them all around the building. Once the girls have gone off to work, he checks: they have left the cakes, and taken all the candy. He thinks, At least they're getting lunch and candy.

Yesenya's teeth loosen, and shift in her gums like pebbles in wet clay.

Nika faints at work. They lay her on the ground until she feels better, and put her back to work.

All in all, work seems to be slowing down quite a bit, which puts Sevik in a frenzy. But it's too late to recruit and train another crew. Besides, what would he do then with these girls?

Konsta turns up one day at Yussup's doorstep. He's just back from Crusade, edgy and feeling sorry for himself. In this mood, even Yesenya, who despises him, would be more tolerable than the other young thugs in his unit.

Yussup won't let him in. Next day, though, Blago's successor Byedny summons Konsta to his office. The Lieutenant gives him a Crusader voucher— basically, a sheet of paper that says the Rudeny government will pay him 5,000 riyal once the Crusade has conquered Saray. "Your fiancee is doing important work for the Kingdom," the Lieutenant says, "but you can't ask her about it." Konsta nods — mysterious are the ways— and takes the card to a moneylender in Hidris, who gives him two hundred for it.

One day Kvek misplaces an onyx earring, and accuses the girls of stealing it. Nimmatob and Plekh strip search them but can't find it. Locking the girls in the workroom, they head to the brewery so they can search it. Yesenya is terrified they will find her comm— the only link to Filipa and Zimara. Sevik would probably kill her. The Dildos come back in an hour and release the girls. Yesenya runs to the brewery in tears.

She finds Yussup collecting the girls' clothes and bedding from where the Submit guys have strewn them across the floor. Frantically she goes through her stuff, unrolling sheets and picking through pockets. Emrush, playing peacefully in a corner, starts crying. Yussup waves both hands for Yesenya to stop. "Where is it?" she cries.

"Where's what?" Nika asks. The other girls have arrived. Vlasta runs to Emrush. "Yesenya, what are you doing?" Taline asks.

Yussup gestures to Yesenya. She follows him to the first floor bathroom. He reaches through the bars of the window to release the shutters. Then he reaches around the edge and brings out her comm in a plastic bag. She bursts out sobbing, and crumples into his arms. She didn't know he has seen her with it. He writes on his pad, "when you go to work" and shows her how to hang the comm onto the crosspiece of the latch and then fold the shutter back, so that no one can see.

As she tries to sleep that night, comm in her fist, she wonders why she was so upset. It's not like she talks much any more with her sister and cousin. What is there to say —"We are dying"— ?

She will never see them again. Yesenya pitches the comm across the room, where it clatters against the wall. The other girls do not comment. Yussup finds it the next morning, still working, and hangs it behind the shutter.

When the girls get to work, they find Kvek imaging the onyx ring, not quite as if nothing happened. He found it where he put it, in a box with the wrong label. Kvek says nothing and won't look them in the eye.

● Delivered into Our Hands

Married to Jesus catch the medical team at a logging town named Hadzych. They set it up carefully. By faking an emergency —one of the Married to Jesus women calls for help— they separate the health personnel from their Brigade escort. They ambush Poscheel's unit in a sidestreet, and kill all four before they are able to return fire.

Two blocks away, the health workers take alarm when they hear the gunfire. Miryam has come along as translator. She has a gun, and so does Mateya, the fighter Poscheel left with them. They are trapped in the back room of a house with a dozen sick people.

"You should leave," she tells the waiting patients. The Crusaders will punish them for seeking help from the government. "We'll come back if we can." The villagers sneak out the back.

"Can you wrap it up?" Miryam prods Nzangiye. He nods. He's busy debriding a wound, but he cleans and packs it quickly. The injured woman and her husband hobble out, thanking the Doctor as they go. Doctor Otavio is gathering up their gear but Mateya tells him to leave it.

"Trackers?" Mateya reminds them. Each has a small button that they take now and swallow. Kut's machines will be able to follow them within a hundred k-m or so. If the team members retrieve them and clean them, they can swallow the trackers again; the batteries should last a couple-three days.

"Damn!" Geir can't find his tracker. He's the nurse. Mateya offers hers but he won't take it.

Nzangiye takes a seat and pulls out the ID badge from around his neck. "You good?" Miryam asks.

"Go," he says. They have talked about this before. Nzangiye from Africa is not going to pass as one of the locals. His best bet is to wait for Poscheel's team. If the Crusaders get there first, they may not kill him.

To the others Mateya explains, "First we'll see if we can help Poscheel. If not, find a place to lie low till dark. I'll go out with Doctor Otavio. A proper couple we are, eh?"

Miryam leaves a minute later with Geir, a few paces behind him, as befits a respectful wife. Miryam has slung her pack over one shoulder, where she can reach the handgun easily. But they hear no further gunfire.

At the head of the alley they slide against a wall when they see half a dozen Crusaders moving fast across the street. A tall blonde woman leads them, and she's got a spray gun.

Geir notes, "I've seen that woman."

"On screen," Miryam confirms with a sinking feeling, as both turn and head the other way. Commander Gloria is famous wherever social media reaches. Her blog and celebrity pals have built her a worldwide fan base. Why, this very day the ladies of Dopple, Tennessee are holding the Third Annual Gloria Dvelko Pre-K Fashion Fair, all proceeds forwarded to the Coalition to Defend the Faith. The four-year-old winner, very stylish in her sequined swimware and red foil tiara, announces, "I love Jesus and Commander Gloria, too."

Miryam realizes Gloria's presence here means the attack today is not just bad luck. Once again the Crusade has targeted the health workers. Very likely Poscheel and her teammates are dead already.

Geir and Miryam hear someone calling after them. The Crusaders have doubled back. They order the two to halt. Miryam pulls her pack closer.

All the women going into contested territory have thought about this. Many conclude that it's better to die in a shootout then to get raped and shot anyway. This time, though, Miryam has got the nurse with her. The Crusaders don't usually kill foreigners when they can ransom them. Today, maybe they won't kill Miryam either. They can't kill everyone, right?

The nurse and the translator turn around and drop their packs. "We are doctors," Miryam announces. "Sweden," she points to Geir, "and Spain," she taps her own chest. The Crusaders approach. Gloria alone wears a uniform; the others simply red armbands. One carries a camera to record this great victory.

Miryam gestures at the cord around her neck. The Crusaders nod; they have seen this before. Very slowly, Miryam pulls out her badge and holds it up. "See?" Geir does likewise.

Gloria doesn't bother looking. Instead, she thumbs her comm till she finds what she's looking for. She looks up and grins. "Liar," she says in English, and sprays the translator, who drops on her ass, then keels over to one side. Geir makes to go to Miryam, but Gloria shakes her finger. One of the Crusader men punches the nurse until he folds, and then loops a plastic tie over his hands and yanks it tight.

Miryam hears gasps and growls, sees shuffling feet. She looks for her pack but can't move to see it. Her arm and hand lie against a curb. They used to be so clever, so graceful. The man with the camera bends over her, very interested. "It's like this," she thinks, and stops.

● Photo Album

Flem's Submit to the Lord boys do much of the Crusade's interrogation work, but Sevik likes to keep his hand in, too. So now and then, when he can't sleep, Sevik heads of a midnight over to the hostage cells at Tyvrdav.

That's when Taline has a few hours to prowl around Sevik's rooms and office in the Tower of Penance. She riffs through the leafs on his desk and slots them into the machine— mostly text that she can't read. He has hundreds of music files, and she stays away from them; that old stuff makes her want to puke. Doesn't this guy have any games?

She tabs through files on one of his spare comms— fingerprint verification, of course, but it doesn't work well, so he always does the override routine that she has seen a dozen times. One bloom takes forever to unfold, and when it does, it takes her breath away. Hundreds of photographs of strange and beautiful objects, which soon she recognizes as the pieces the Skylanders have been cleaning in the workroom below the scriptorium. She understands now why Kvek was so careful with the camera— seen this way, these artifacts are extraordinary, even the old and broken ones. For some, Kvek has taken several pictures from different angles. Below each set of images there's text and numbers with the riyal sign. The prices astonish her.

Excited, Taline zips through looking for her own prize, the one she chose as her reward, and finds it. It's an armlet with two antelope clashing, horns entwined. They leap as if alive. Taline can't read the description but she recognizes the price listed: RY 35-45,000. She can't believe it. She starts thinking who she can sell it to. She knows shops in Hidris that buy used guns and games. She just has to sneak down there one day and sell it. Then she'll pay one of the Crusaders —Yesenya's fiance Konsta, maybe— to kill Sevik.

Maybe she should choose a different prize, for more money. She scans the other pieces. Kvek has priced some of them at up to a half million riyal. Number five with a bunch of zeros, more than she's ever seen. Sevik said these were to be gifts to churches, but it's not like him to be so generous. With a pang, it occurs to her that Sevik is never going to let her keep the armlet.

Taline knows Yesenya's comm number, and sends her the file. She whispers, "Ask Zimara what this means."

Something else she finds, later that week: a series of head shots of gaunt and scruffy people, some pretty battered, about one hundred in all. One is a black man. What's he doing here? Taline has never seen a black man except on TV.

These pictures have prices, too. Sevik is selling people? Who would want to buy these sorry-looking specimens? She has Yesenya pass these files on to Zimara as well. Everything Taline touches goes back exactly as she found it.

Sevik returns from his midnight excursions all hot and bothered, and likes to have Taline waiting for him. He's already had sex —she can smell it— but likes to have her peel off his spattered clothing and stroke his head in her lap while tell he tells her how important the work is that he's doing, how few people are strong enough to do it, and how he, Doctor Rotebagh Sevik, will persevere for the glory of God.

● Happy Birthday to You

Emrush turns three today. The girls have stolen candles and Plekh's lighter and sit in a circle on the floor. The candy Yussup hid— they've got it here, fifty pieces or more in a bowl. Solemnly Yesenya slides it over to Vlasta, who solemnly shares out the pieces one by one. The girls leave all the candy on the table, except Emrush, who stuffs his mouth so full Vlasta has to extract them with her fingers, stickily. He waits patiently and she lets him have a few soft ones.

They take this occasion to induct Gabriyela and Mihaela into Sky Land, and initiate them into the sacred lore. They talk now about Sky Land as if it were more allegory than earthly location, a place of legend and promise at the far end of the world. They sing the Kite Mothers song and a baby song to Emrush and blow out the candles.

● Touched by the Hand of God

Next time Sevik comes to fetch Taline, he finds her moaning on the floor, convulsing, blood pouring from deep gouges in hands and feet.

"How childish!" he rebukes her, and stalks out, slamming the door. Alarmed, the Skylanders race upstairs. They cry out to see the mess.

Taline opens one eye, then both, and sits up.

"Taline, what happened?"

Taline holds up her arms, so the blood runs off her elbows. She flicks her hands, spraying the other girls, who shriek and back away, to Taline's great amusement. Yussup comes stomping in. Taline pulls down her sleeves, ineffectively, and when she stands up, her feet leave big smears of blood. She ignores

Yussup's interrogatory warble, and when he tries to take her hand she drops again to the floor, thrashing. She rasps nonsense words in a ghastly constricted voice, as if she's being strangled. The old man observes for a minute, and leaves the room. Taline soon tires. The other girls help her up, sit her in a chair. Yussup comes back with alcohol, gauze, and a bucket of soapy water. She starts to slide off the chair, but Yesenya tells her sharply to cut it out, so in the end Taline lets Yussup clean and bind the wounds. The old man knows, though, there's something wrong that he can't see.

He calls in the medical team. This is a monk with the first aid kit, who is as close to a doctor as Rudomil's captive workers will ever see. The monk has Yussup bring Taline to the infirmary, where she throws another fit. This time they can make out some of the words:

"It bites me! It bites! Kill the devil! Devil of Saray! Kill the devil!"

Other monks gather to watch. The audience inspires Taline to new heights.

"Free our poor Rudeny! The land cries out! Blood of Jesus! Wash it clean!"

Crazy bitch, seems to be the consensus. They decide to probe her vagina. Naturally this does not conduce to tranquil inquiry. Taline's howls bring Torkim's man Yanko.

"What the fuck? Let her be," he commands.

"We were only trying to . . . ."

"I see what you were doing. Tell me: do you really want to know?" He means, Do they really want to know whether she's sexually active? That might raise a bunch of questions best left unanswered. Besides, he's beginning to get an idea, a cool idea, but one that requires the presumption of sexual purity.

Next day Taline is back at work. To protect her hands from the chemicals, Kvek assigns her to packaging duties. Still, Taline finds it awkward to handle things with bandaged hands. Kvek won't look at her. The guard Nimmatob ventures a joke about her blood, but it comes out wrong, and he shuts up after that. They don't see Sevik all morning. After lunch, Sevik opens the door halfway, looks around, and closes it again.

Brother Yanko brings the Abbot to the brewery that night. Taline performs to her usual high standards. Torkim's eyebrows make as if to leap off his forehead. "See what I mean?" Yanko says.

"The side, what about the side?"

Yanko pulls up her shirt. "Hands, feet, a spear thrust in the side."

Downstairs, Torkim questions the other girls closely. "She's seen these devils before?"

"Not devils," Yesenya replies. "Angels. She sees angels."

"Beautiful angels," Nika affirms.

It's Vlasta who supplies the crucial datum. "That's why the devils bite her."

"Emrush was real sick," Vlasta adds. "He was going to die. Taline prayed for him. Look at him now." She holds up her brother, placidly sucking his thumb. The Abbot steps back. He doesn't like to touch snotty babies. But he gets the idea.

"We must test this bleeding girl," he tells Yanko.

"Your Ineffableness," the Brother begins. "If I may . . . We celebrate the feast of Sankt Rudo in just a few weeks. We are all very busy. Let's postpone the test until after the festival. In the meantime, perhaps we should make the girl's gifts more widely available."

Yanko is right, as usual. Could be a boost for our boys' morale, having a living saint in their midst; such a pretty one, too. Good for lagging box office and for the buildup to the festival.

Torkim appoints himself Taline's tutor, so that she understands her gift, and the Word of God. He schools her Monday, six to nine. With nothing much else to do but bleed, Taline takes to her lessons with enthusiasm. After the first meeting —such a downer to hang out with a dying girl— the Abbot delegates the work to Brother Yanko, who adds his own artful refinements to the program. Soon they've gotten the candidate martyr ready for a paying audience.

Sevik is so upset he stays away for days. He figures Taline will snap out of her crazy mood. When he gets back to the brewery, he is appalled to see a small crowd of pilgrims around her pallet. Propped up on pink pillows, she holds court with gentle wit and homely wisdom. She has seen the face of God, her fans whisper. Two monks stand by with screenpads, recording her observations and kind advice. Now, it seems, she's talking about Judas and the Judas among them.

This is not good.

"Clear them out," Sevik demands. "Get rid of them."

"Don't worry, Brother Sevik," Yanko says. "We are moving her today. She'll be out of your hair in an hour."

"You have no authority here! Get out!" Sevik wades into the patient throng, arms flailing. "Get out!" An old man goes down with a bloody nose. The rest back away, but won't leave. Brother Yanko sends for the Abbot, who comes right away.

"Brother Sevik, this girl has special gifts. You can't deprive the people of her holy prayers. What are you going to tell them?"

"Bloody nonsense. Look at her! She is a peasant!"

"Look at *them*" — the pilgrims. "They believe. The One Trues who come here so faithfully and support the monastery and the Crusade," Torkim points out.

Sevik wonders if somehow he has unlocked in the girl a latent spiritual force. "No," he decides, "she's just a stupid twat." It's a little unsettling, the idea of divine power coursing through the fingers of a child— the child he's been abusing. Now the monks are carrying Taline out on her pallet. Sevik wants to grab the girl and beat her. He raises his fist as she goes by, but hesitates. He's afraid to touch the power line.

• Mourn. Plan.

They hold Miryam's funeral at New Start refugee camp. Many Brigade members come to join the mourners. People come from towns and villages across Rudeny, families that Miryam helped heal and find their way home. Zimaras work the quiet, angry crowd, recruiting for the Brigade. Plenty of women and men want to strike back. The Brigade will show them how.

Avbury feels old. She has seen many die, but never one so close, a colleague and confidante her own daughter's age. Already Avbury misses Miryam's bravery, joy and keen understanding. (Years later, Avbury tells Gret, "That's when I thought about getting out of the business. Had your mom not been there, I think I would have packed up and left.")

Avbury deems it not good politics to let Zimara speak to the mourners, but she is there, and everyone knows it, because of the armed men and women surrounding Avbury's office. Inside Zimara and Mandalika meet with their allies. Besides the Doctor, Colonel Kut attends with his aide Djordjevitch. Khamzat, the New Start security boss. Lieutenant Halevy of the Rudeny army, and another man in a cheap suit who bears himself like an officer. He won't give his name, but Kut knows who he is. And, to Zimara's surprise, Assembly President Radomax 'Deesh. They sit elbow to elbow in folding chairs around the doctor's desk.

Zimara taps a tattered map on the desk, much folded and hand drawn in pencil. "Filipa drew this. There's an old mine not far from the monastery. The Crusade uses it to hold the people they want to sell. We have seen a file; as of a few days ago, that's where they were keeping Nzangiye, Geir, and over a hundred others. We have shared this with the Colonel." Kut nods.

"We've gotten people back before," Avbury says. "Very expensive, and I hate to do it, but I can find the money."

"I appreciate that. What concerns us, soon they will celebrate the Sacrifice of Sankt Rudo."

"How does that— ?"

Kut explains. “This is a big day for the Crusade. Thousands of pilgrims will head to the monastery. Modrek will want to put on a show, a spectacle. He’s sure to shoot some hostages.”

“We just don’t know which,” Zimara says.

Avbury puts her bony hand on Zimara’s. “You know where they are. Can you help?”

Zimara purses her lips. “It would be better for the military to get them.”

Halevy guesses, “The Zimaras have other plans that day. Am I right?”

The bandit chief doesn't say, but slides the sheet across to the Lieutenant. “I’m sure you’ve got satellite images of the approach. We can find out for you what’s going on inside, the security routine, all that.”

Halevy glances at it, passes it to Officer Anonymous. “It would help a lot to know their health status,” he says. “We can’t move them if they can’t move.”

“OK. We’ll ask.”

Mandalika says, “We appreciate that the government doesn’t want to cross the border. Does that mean never, under any circumstances? You can’t always play it safe.”

‘Deesh gestures to see the sketch map. He studies it a minute, passes it back. It doesn’t mean anything to him. He’s a politician, not a soldier. He looks up and says, “We can authorize this. We invited these brave doctors here to help our people. We are obliged to protect them. Anyway,” he shrugs, “the Kulkhiz government say they know nothing of any hostages. So how can they tell when they’re gone?” ‘Deesh looks to Halevy’s anonymous boss, who nods and stands up.

“Let us know,” the officer says. “Halevy here will get you what you need.” He gestures to the Lieutenant. They leave together.

• Mystic Moments

When Duke Luka Nikol made Rudomil his headquarters for war against the Bulgars, he modeled West Gate after the great iwan at Trebizond: portals set in a high-vaulted passageway through the walls, opening north onto the sacred space of the monastery proper, and southward onto a stone block terrace above Serve the King Plaza. The Seventy Seven Steps drop from terrace to plaza, signifying the Seven Virgins and Seven Mortifications; to save your soul you ascend them on your knees, seven times or seventy. (Devotees vehemently dispute the exact price, and whether it counts if you take a hour for lunch). The monks have thoughtfully cordoned off one side of the great stairway for the penitents; tourists entering Rudomil get the middle; the far side is reserved for the tiny booths of vendors of icons, medallions, prayer leafs, ceramic saints and chilled Clear Sparkling.

The monks set Taline up in the souvenir stall at the top of the stairs, where they used to sell replicas of the Big Toe, Sankt Rudo’s Sword, and other sacred relics. They have remodeled, nailing tin foil angels to the edge of the roof, and if the take exceeds their target numbers, they will order classier plasteen seraphim you can light up from inside. The kiosk is open at the front, and they have installed a lounge chair for the holy girl, and a couple folding chairs for pilgrims seeking guidance. The monks set a Love Bucket by the door, a plastic pail with an angel sticker, to suck the coins from the pockets of unwary visitors.

Pilgrims new to Rudomil stop by out of curiosity. They stay to hear personal counseling. The seekers ask Taline about business deals, inheritances, jealous mothers-in-law, the meaning of dreams. She asks about their jobs, families, love life. Old women people talk about children, dead for years, for whom they still grieve every day. Old men, scarcely able to hobble up the steps, ask Taline to pray for dying wives.

“Trust in Jesus,” Taline tells them, in a breathless little-girl voice. “Your sorrow, your physical pain, all that comes from some deeper spiritual wound. Put yourself in the Father’s hands. Let Him wash

away your sins. Let Him heal you." Taline's mom used to listen to the Love Adviser and a dozen other broadcasts; Taline finds now that she can recall any number of soothing replies.

"I feel better," the seeker says. "Yes, definitely. I feel much better." Sometimes Taline sees one of her devotees the next day, or the following week. "I got the job!" they might say, or "Djugash came home safe!"

"Praise God!" Taline exclaims. They praise her as well.

Soon there's a line in the morning, waiting for the monks to carry her out in an ornate sedan chair, raised high for all the faithful to see. Taline smiles beatifically, and throws fits promptly at eleven and three, leaving gobs of spit and blood on the flagstones. The monks cover one wall of the kiosk with a big photo of her face, and hang posters up and down Redemption Street. The monks change her bandages after each convulsion and sell them. When they hear that some guy is hawking Taline bandages with the blood of dogs and rats, they send Flem's men to protect their brand. Then they sell that guy's bloody rags as Taline's. The wait line stretches down the great stairway.

A girl comes for advice. She talks fast, while her parents are still making their way up. "I want to die," she says.

Taline listens to her story without surprise. The holy girl plucks at her lip for a moment, and asks, "Do you think your dying will make any difference, to anyone?"

The other teen thinks about it, and shakes her head. Tears come to her eyes.

"What's your name, girl?"

"Dryana."

"OK, Dryana. Leave it to me." Taline takes her hands. "Do you trust me? I'll take care of it." Taline closes her eyes and leans back, face upturned. Her lips move as if in prayer, but she's just counting to one hundred. She smiles and opens her eyes.

"OK. Jesus told me you are definitely going to die soon, but He won't say exactly when. He said it's not going to hurt at all. In the meantime, don't worry. Just live your life as best you can. Jesus has his eyes on you."

The girl sobs, gripping Taline painfully.

The prophet squeezes back. "You understand me?"

The girl nods. She wants to say something but she is too choked up.

"I have *my* eyes on you." Taline thinks of the Skylanders, and feels sad she has to leave them.

The parents bustle in, loud and urgent. The girl stands up, wiping her face with the back of her wrist. Mom squeezes around her to lean over and embrace Taline, which Taline doesn't like, because it hurts. Dad has important business to discuss: this son of a bitch landlord won't pay for some electrical work, finest quality, and he's tied into the Crusaders so our honest electrician here might as well whistle for his money. "Is that fair?" he demands. Taline can't see how it could be.

Mom reassures them both: "God will get even for us, won't he, Miss Taline?"

More practical, Taline suggests, "There must be a lot of people this dirty landlord rips off."

"True enough. He's a rotten bastard."

"Must be a lot of people hate this guy."

"He's protected," Dad points out.

"How many Crusaders are there in your village?"

Dad mulls it over. "Nah," he says. He pauses, and waves his hand. "Nah," he says.

Taline takes Dad's rough right hand into her own, touches his palm with a forefinger, and folds his fingers over the spot. "'Fear him not, for I have delivered him into your hands.'" She presses hard. "God is stronger than anyone. Go now with His protection." Taline makes the kind of gesture she has seen the priests use. Very nicely she shoos the family out. She and Brother Yanko have talked about it: for rich families, up to five minutes; everyone else, no more than three. Keep the line moving. Got to be fair to all the people waiting.

The pilgrims bring Taline crosses, icons, prayer beads, family bibles, and photos of their pets, much of which Taline has the monks nail or glue to the walls of the booth, inside and out. The pious take to leaving food as well— scrumptious little cakes and spiced fish paste on lacy paper, with tiny ribbons on the toothpicks. They watch carefully to see if Taline will take the bait, and stain her holiness by letting one bite slip past her lips. They are mean, for sure, but they don't see it that way. Every saint must suffer. If they can help Taline get to heaven a bit sooner, why, maybe some of her awesome holy glow will rub off on them like glitter from the wings of a butterfly.

Sometimes Taline sees the women she knows from Vyolka's barracks. They come to clean the pilgrim stairway, and, if Goranka's not around, stop by to see the holy girl. They are a lot nicer to her now. One day Vyolka comes, too. She wears church clothes and her Sunday cap. She waits till the others leave, then sits down with her hands clasped in her lap.

"Here's the thing, Taline. I said a bunch of rotten things to you. I want you to forgive me."

People are an endless surprise. Taline tries to remember. Yes, Vyolka: impatience, rudeness, occasional petty malice, casual violence, enduring neglect. That's just the way people act. What makes Vyolka so upset?

Vyolka misreads the silence. "OK, if you can't forgive me, I'm going to give you fifty riyal and have done with it." She digs in her pocket, comes up with a roll of fives and tens and thrusts it at the girl. "Right?"

"Vyolka, keep your money. I forgive you."

Vyolka keeps her hand out for a minute. When Taline doesn't take the money, Vyolka nods primly and tucks it away again. She stands up and leaves. Taline watches her go down the steps, hesitate, and come back. Without looking at Taline, Vyolka drops four fives into the Love Bucket, and hurries down the steps. Taline thinks, I should be a saint. I'd be good at it. But I have to die.

Taline spots Goranka one afternoon, and beckons. The crew boss doesn't want to approach, but Taline keeps waving her hand, and others in the crowd impatiently push Goranka forward.

Goranka won't sit, but stands with her arms folded. "I know your tricks, Taline. You're no saint."

Taline raises a pierced hand in blessing, puts a finger to her lips, and winks at her former boss. Goranka laughs, and flicks a coin into the bucket— for some watching from the stairway, a miracle greater than all the rest.

Yussup brings the Skylanders one day. "They say you're a saint," Nika reports.

"Don't be silly."

"No, really," Vlasta says. She points to Taline's bandaged hands. "You bleed like Jesus."

Taline looks around, then gestures for them to watch closely. She unwraps her left hand. She has kept her nails long, and sharpens them with her teeth. Now she digs into her wounds. They open up and gush nicely. "See?"

Yesenya flinches. "Don't do that, Taline."

"Why not?" Can't they see how clever she is? Tongue pressed to lip, Taline scrapes flesh and scab with her thumbnail. A nice yellow-gray glob rides the torrent to the floor.

Yesenya grabs Taline's hands. "Stop!"

"OK, I'll stop. Don't blubber."

Yussup leaves a basket of goodies the Skylanders have prepared: pastries and sausage rolls and spicy sauce. Taline dips a finger into the sauce, and licks it. Mmmm! She gives the rest to the next pilgrim, who would rather know the winning lottery number.

The last holy girl didn't work out. She claimed to be taking no food or water, but after the monks caught her mom with a squeeze bulb up her sleeve, 100mL of grape soda pop, they put up a screen to keep visitors at arms' length. That girl died a couple days later. The monks regretted the loss of revenues, but it had to be done. Business like this, with such a low threshold to entry, the key to

protecting market share is strict quality control. The old Abbot took the loss philosophically. It's the nature of this position to be short-term.

Taline has made a small space for herself at the back of the booth, set off by a pea green curtain, with just enough room for a narrow cot. Taline gets a lunch break —she sucks lemons— and another break after her midafternoon convulsion, when she comes back here to lie down. She makes them glue to the ceiling little fluorescent stars and comets, so she can look at them while she's resting. Sometimes she holds up a little mirror, angling her head this way and that. She pinches her cheeks. She unbuttons her blouse and pinches the skin on her collar bone or ribs. Some days she feels like she's making progress, blue veins pulsing through the translucent marble of her skin. Other times she feels herself rotting away inside, and watches anxiously for the putrescence to erupt for all the world to see. She becomes achy and discouraged, and impatient to shed this pasty prison.

● Such a Shame

Damyana feels sad about Miryam. So many good people have died. When will this terrible war be over?

Arasely starts the investigation even before the funeral. The Brigade had accompanied the health workers dozens of times before the attack at Hadzych. How did this happen? And what is this new Crusader unit? Men calling themselves Married to Jesus. There's some online operation claiming credit for the murders, ostensibly run by Gloria Dvelko, but as far as Arasely can find out Dvelko is just another Crusader groupie, richer than most, a pass-around diversion for the Crusader high command. It's bizarre.

Arasely's team talks with people in Hadzych and Saray, as well as members of the Brigade, including Damyana. Reluctantly, they also ask Colonel Kut's help in tracing comm traffic in and out of the combat groups. It never occurs to them that not all of Damyana's calls to Besim Brod go to her mother. The flurry of searchings and pokings make Damyana very uncomfortable, and for the time being she cuts comm with her dear friend Commander Gloria. People might misunderstand. Father Karastepan might have raised questions, but he's gone. All in all, this is a good time to be out of town. Damyana takes leave to return to Besim Brod, saying her mom is sick.

In the end, Arasely's team concludes that the Crusaders must have gotten the health workers' schedule from some informant, but they can never pinpoint the source. Could have been someone in the Health Ministry, or the villages, even the refugee camp. It takes the Brigade six weeks to replace every comm, in case Sevik has found a way through their snareware. The Council decides to resume combat operations, but under much stricter secrecy procedures. This includes the planning for upcoming action at Hidris.

Twice Avbury sent Miryam to New York to talk to rich donors there. When Melanie hears about the murder, she sends the Brigade another hundred thousand Euros. She also names the treasure she seeks: the Hoard of the Khazars.

Larissa Dvelko buys Damyana's mom a brand new motorbike. It has baskets on the side, so when Fadees goes shopping, she can carry a week's groceries. She is getting on in years, and the bike is a big help.

● Festival Prep

The Zimaras have been working for months to figure out how to get Yesenya and the Skylanders out of Hidris and across the border, along with a couple truckloads of hostages and captive workers. They are

determined as well to make the Crusaders pay a high price for murdering Poscheel and Miryam. They'll get only one chance, and they need a diversion. The festival of Sankt Rudo seems made to order.

Every year tens of thousands of pilgrims gather at Rudomil Monastery to commemorate their martyrs, profess their loyalties, and renew their commitment to exterminating enemies ancient and up to date, all the while earning sky miles for that last ride to glory. They come from towns and hamlets all across Kulkhiz and Rudeny, representing churches, prayer circles, futbol teams, police departments, weightlifter clubs, crafts guilds and businesses. For months they have been preparing flags and floats and festival fantasiyas, the sacred scenes and stories they'll present. They compete, too, with extravagant masks and costumes, depicting characters from the Bible or local legend: a swarm of saints and archangels, King Topkonot, Prince Paltasar, the Venerable Propafferol, the Seven Virgins, the Twelve Warlords who repelled the Saracens, or was it the Tatars? Most edifying of all, of course, will be the convulsing host of snotfaced, sneering, sniveling, groveling apostates, flailing along like some back-broke squirrel— the traitors, infidels and demons that our heroes have put to flight, and will punish till the end of time.

Naturally, the festival —the Sacrifice, they call it— is a cornerstone event for Rudomil Monastery. They count on these few days to make their budget for the year. So the monks have been working furiously to churn out images, amulets, charms, videos, prayer beads, and commemorative medallions for the hordes of devotees. This year's favorite: the *100 to 1!* t-shirt, the slogan emblazoned on a crucifix-sword. That's the number of Turks Sankt Rudo is reputed to have sent to Satan before his own sword shattered. He stood on the pile of bodies and raised his hands to heaven. "I promised one hundred, Lord! Delivered!" he reported, before an infidel spear twirled his guts out like spaghetti.

Big event for the Crusader command, too, only their second since they took over the monastery. It's a chance to host the believers, take homage as the new spiritual leadership for both countries, and recruit new blood for their armies. For the rank and file it's a time to see and be seen, to swap war stories and souvenirs, to hobknob with officers, to strut before friends and relatives from their home towns, and to kneel weeping at last, after so many murders, washed clean by the cheers of the crowd and the blessings of the new abbot and Archbishop Eddie, and by the sheer rapture of their dance with the divine.

Unfortunately, the swaggering presence of the Crusader boys has scared off many of the usual clientele. What's more, the captains have generously offered their services to the monastery as protectors and business consultants, in return for an even more generous cut of the pilgrim trade. They make up for it a little by leaning on the troops for contributions. Thus, for instance, Brother Yanko might show up one day at Lieutenant Byedny's barracks with a cartful of polyester prayer shawls. "What mom or girlfriend wouldn't be proud to get one of these lustrous beauties from her beloved boy in uniform?" he wonders, and the Lieutenant adds, "Come on, boys. Earn a little piece of heaven!"

For the faithful, the Sacrifice of Sankt Rudo is the highlight of their year, a peak of ecstatic spirituality.

For the slaves of Satan, it's a heaven-sent opportunity to make trouble.

• Loose Ends

The Crusaders are preparing, too.

Sevik and Brother Michael watch the sun drop past the mountains from the back deck at Untouched Virgin Spiritual Life Center. As they drink, Sevik screens Professor Kvek's magnum opus: the complete catalog of the Hoard of the Khazars, or as Sevik has titled it, Apostolic Art of the Early Empire.

"Magnificent, aren't they?" Armor, amulets, riding gear, cauldrons, coins, pendants, daggers, divining tools, fragments of carpet; depicting eagles, antelopes, kings, warriors, hunters, duels, sieges,

sacrifices and (Sevik is sure) angels, prophets, missionaries, and the Holy Ghost. “Imagine a shipload of such treasures.”

Brother Michael is more interested in the price ranges posted under each item. “People will pay this much for old broken junk? They must be out of their minds.”

“Just fabulously wealthy. What do you buy when you own half the world? Heads so far up their ass they believe buying beautiful things makes them beautiful.” Sevik points out one of his favorites but Michael barely glances at it. “Remember, these are asking prices. But if we can get anywhere close . . . .”

“Who else has this list?”

“Our European agent has an encrypted copy. Once we offload the collection, we’ll send him the key.”

“So the generals don’t know.”

“Admiral Vraymn? We’ve sent samples. And they’re going to have a man on the ship. Some hack from Djemdjad, Kvek tells me, who won’t understand even half of what he’s looking at.”

“And the German— “

“Faul.”

“Right. What’s to prevent him from ripping us off?”

“That’s more of a concern. Before, it wouldn’t make sense for him to cross us, because we still had the bulk of the collection. Now . . ." he shrugs. "We have these estimates, but they are Faul's work as much as Kvek’s. Once the ship gets to Europe, we’ve lost our leverage. It’s one of the costs of dumping everything at once, as the generals insist.”

“Sure we have leverage. We can send Flem to kill him and everyone he knows.” Brother Michael hands back the screenpad, and takes a long pull on his bottle. “Out by next week, then.”

“That’s the best time. Everyone’s eyes will be on the festival, including Kulkhiz security. Thousands of pilgrims, no one will notice the last trucks heading to Djemdjad harbor.”

“So we don’t need the Professor any more.”

“Nope.”

“What about the girls?”

“They go on the boat. They’ve done such a good job, they deserve a little vacation. Only thing, you may have to buy new wives for their husbands.”

Michael waves his hand; no big deal. “And the bleeder?”

“I have an idea. Tell me what you think. Torkim wants her in the parade, the Living Saint, all that. He and she will be together in the first vehicle. Unfortunately, that’s the hardest one to protect from terrorists.”

Michael smiles. “I like it. Another martyr for the Crusade.”

“Why waste a murder?”

“Innocent little girl. The crowd will go wild.”

It gets cold, and Michael staggers inside to sleep it off. Doctor Sevik lingers on the deck a few moments longer, savoring a delicious sadness. He likes Taline. Sweet and spirited. Too scrawny now. Also a demanding bitch. No gratitude. No understanding of sacrifices he has had to make for his artistic vision. But God has a plan for everyone, and Sevik takes solace in knowing she will serve Him too.

Also, he has set aside the very best of the treasure for his own collection. He will become the world expert on the art of early Rudeny.

The Crusader chiefs find out a few days later that Gloria Dvelko has shanghaied their little martyr for her own parade vehicle. Gloria will be second in line behind the Abbot, driving the captives she took at Hadzych, crowing about her victory. Holy girl Taline will make a nice adornment for Gloria’s triumph.

“Filthy bitch,” Brother Michael complains about his erstwhile lover.

"Actually, this is better," Sevik figures. "We'll put Flem with the hostages. At the right time, we slip him a gun, and pow! We take care of both at the same time."

"Commander Gloria. She is long overdue." Brother Michael strokes his jaw. "Eddie won't like it."

"Eddie Nagahry, who cares? Couple months from now, collectors will be climbing over each other to bid on the treasures we've shipped. We split millions with the generals, what's the Archbishop going to do? You think they'll listen to him whine about some dead cunt?"

• Change of Plan

The Skylanders have seen Filipa with Yesenya, so the Brigade assigns Filipa to make contact with Taline. Filipa waits in line an hour on the stairs at West Gate. When her turn comes she pops into the booth and sits on the folding chair. Taline seems to be in a kind of stupor, staring vacantly, expressionless.

Filipa shifts the chair to get into Taline's field of view. "Do you know me?"

Taline focusses. "I know you. Yesenya's sister. I remember." Taline smiles like a summer day.

As a lot of pilgrims do, probably for the same reason, Filipa leans close, her lips almost to the girl's ear. Filipa's concern is less with the other worshippers than with any devices Sevik might have planted. The sensor in her own pocket detects nothing, but that's not a guarantee.

"Listeners?"

The holy girl shakes her head. "I don't think so."

"I'm going to bring Yesenya away, and you, and Vlasta and Nika. I need your help."
Taline doesn't seem surprised, or even very interested. "They're locked up."

"Can you call them to you?"

"Not any more. They came once, but Sevik doesn't like it. Yussup comes sometimes."

"Who's that?" Taline explains.

"He's OK?"

Taline nods. "He's OK."

Filipa holds Taline's hands. Taline can feel little poky things in her palm. She guesses right away they are some kind of comm. "I want you to give these to Yussup. Tell him to give them to Yesenya."

"They put a machine by the door at the scriptorium. It goes off any time someone brings a strange comm."

"These are different. They're trackers. They'll let us follow the trucks. And they won't ping because we won't activate them until they leave the compound. We know you've been loading trucks, yes?"

"Yes." Filipa lets go her hands, and Taline puts a fist in her pocket.

"Tell Yesenya to get these into the trucks so no one can see them. Best if she can drop them into the packages. This is important."

"OK."

Filipa stands. "I'll come back. The next part I'll tell you later." Filipa squeezes the girl's fingertips, very gently. "Taline, don't die. I know Yesenya loves you and wants you to be safe. We'll get you out of here."

Taline assents reluctantly. She has been set on dying, just fading away peaceably. She doesn't want to have to think about these new complications.

Holding her hand low, Filipa takes an image of Taline, so the Zimaras will recognize her.

Three days later the Lieutenant calls Kut, still on his mysterious mission in Kulkhiz: "Got 'm! They're unloading the trucks onto the *Jasmine Breeze* in Djemdjad harbor."

• Severance Pay

Sevik congratulates the Professor. "Honestly, I wasn't sure we'd get it all done on time. You've done a magnificent job." He's talking with Kvek and Flem in the workroom. The girls have gone for the day.

"Well, we've got a bit more. We've got to package these last pieces, and they're the most delicate."

"We'll let the girls take care of that. Then we're all done."

Highly attuned, Kvek catches something in Sevik's tone. "You know you don't have to worry about the girls. They're stupid. Send them back to Vyolka. She'll keep them quiet."

Sevik shakes his head. "Can't do that. It's a shame, but they know too much. So do you." Sevik watches Kvek ponder the remark. Flem moves behind the Professor.

Kvek sticks out his chin. "Why would you do this? Those silly girls, you can't trust them. They're not reliable. But you know me. I have always been entirely loyal to the Crusade."

"Sure, I know. But I could be wrong. Things like this, you want to be certain."

Kvek talks fast. "Wait! Just wait— I can help you. There's so much more— " Something in Sevik's expression makes the Professor turn around. Flem stabs the scholar in the throat.

"Geez, what a mess," Sevik complains. "Couldn't you wait?"

Flem seems put out. He likes to think he does a good job. Together he and the Doctor drag the body to the far door and roll it down into the cave. Flem unreels the hose and starts to flush the blood away.

"I don't want to do the girls like that," Flem says.

"No, we're going to wait. Plekh and Nimma will take them to the *Jasmine Breeze*. Once they're out to sea. . . . Anyway, I've got another job for you that day."

• Know How

Every Thursday morning, before the monks bring out Taline the Holy Sacrifice, before the crowds arrive, ten women from the Nunnery sweep and wash the terrace, plaza and stairway, then sit on the steps to take their breakfast. Filipa comes up pushing a squeaky cart, offers to sell them spinach cakes and roasted nuts. The other women recognize her from earlier visits to Yesenya, but they take care not to show it. With the cakes the first customer gets an audio leaf, which she plays once and shreds.

Some of the women are from Meeyadz, so next morning Filipa brings Nisibis. They fall in with the work crew just outside the monastery. The press-ganged women give the two Zimaras mops and trash baskets. They talk while they sweep and scrub. The guards at West Gate don't notice a thing.

Commander Gloria has been boasting of the murders at Hadzych, but the women learn now for the first time that Poscheel was one of the victims. Four knew Poscheel from the village; one married her brother. "At least she was fighting back," Shkeepay remarks. "Here we serve."

These women want out. "What do we need to do?" Afiza asks.

Filipa has several suggestions. She adds, "Something you can do for us in the meantime." The Brigade needs to know more about the hostages held at Tyvrdav. "Do you know anyone who works at the old mine?"

They do. Some of the women go there once a week to haul away the trash and a body or two. "It's a sorrow," Shkeepay says, "what they do to those people. I bring bread but there are too many."

"These are the people Poscheel was trying to protect," Filipa explains. "Doctors, nurses. People who help women. Tell me, have you seen a black man among them?"

"Yes. A tall man. Last I saw, he was in better shape than some."

"OK. His name is Nzangiye. I need you to give him something." She holds up a little disk, the size of a half riyal coin, but thicker.

"What's that?"

"It's a kind of a comm, with two numbers pre-set."

One of the women hesitates. "I don't know. . . ."

"It's dangerous if they catch you with this," Filipa acknowledges. "But we want to get these people out, too, and we need to know about their health, whether they can move. This doctor can tell us."

Afiza holds out her hand. "I'll do it."

"If you can't find Nzangiye, ask for Doctor Otavio, or a nurse named Geir." Before she hands it over, Filipa adds, "We'll know if the wrong people get this." Afiza nods.

As the women of the crew finish up and put their gear in order for the next task, the two Zimaras also pass comms to Afiza and a woman named Ksaynay.

"You have a place to hide these?" Of course they do. Hide comms, hide secrets, hide friends, hide love. They know how.

One day at the barracks Afiza catches Serka listening outside the door as the plotters talk among themselves in low voices. The others know Serka as a suck-up and a squealer and throw her down the stairs. Crying, she runs to Goranka.

"Look what they did to me!" Serka shows Goranka the bruises on her head and elbows. "Afiza and the others, they are up to something," she tells the crew boss.

"Show me," Goranka says. When they get to the top of the stairs, Goranka knocks her down once again. At the foot of the stairs Serka spits bloody clots into her hand and looks up in hurt surprise. Serka didn't know that Goranka is one of Afiza's lovers. Goranka comes down the stairs, steps over the snitch with a warning look, and walks out the door. Serka decides to keep her battered mouth shut, even as others are inducted into the conspiracy. Goranka doesn't know and doesn't want to know.

• Warning

Already a week before the festival pilgrims swarm the monastery. Makes Sevik nervous. He posts additional Submit to the Lord men around the scriptorium, and decides it's safer all around to lock the work crew underground. That evening, instead of the girls returning to the brewery, Plekh comes by for food and bedrolls. Yussup becomes very agitated and wants to know where the girls are.

"They complain about you, old man. Been fiddling the little pussies, have we?"

Emrush calls for Vlasta. Yussup tells him she'll be staying at the workroom for a few days. Emrush is the only one who can understand Yussup's mangled speech. The toddler doesn't seem too concerned. He knows Yussup will take good care of him.

Kvek has been staying in a guest room at the back of the Abbot's palace. Emrush on his back, Yussup goes there looking for the professor.

Brother Yanko is equally puzzled. "Haven't seen him. He told us days ago he was about done with his work. He was planning to leave for Djemdjad tomorrow. Then just this afternoon, one of Doctor Sevik's men came by to collect the professor's files and clothes."

Yussup writes, "Tell me if he comes back. Important."

Next morning the old man prepares a feast and brings it to the scriptorium. The men at the gate collect their toll and let him through. Plekh takes the rest at the door to the workshop. Yussup can see the girls at the far end, but Plekh won't let him talk to them.

Yussup knows where Yesenya keeps her comm, but he doesn't have the passcode. He goes looking for Konsta, finds him at a games place on Redemption Street. He shows Konsta the comm and writes, "Yesenya's. Calls who?"

"A comm? Sly girl. Must be from her sister."

Yussup writes, "Zimara."

"Filipa or Zimara. What do you want? You want to call them?"

It takes a while for Yussup to explain with scribbles and gestures. Konsta gets the idea. "I don't know how to call them. They left Echmash a long time ago. Did you try the refugee camp?"

Yussup taps Konsta twice on the chest.

It's not hard to get the New Start number. Konsta asks for Filipa and gets someone named Avbury, who acts very suspicious. She tells him she'll call back. Hours later, Konsta gets the call.

"Is this Konsta?"

"Filipa?"

"This is Zimara. What do you want?"

“I don't know if you remember. I’m Yesenya’s fiance.”

“Is that what you call yourself?” She has heard this voice before. At that time he was telling another boy to bash in her skull with a shovel.

“This old man here, he's worried about Yesenya. Yussup. He told me to call you.”

“I know about Yussup. What happened?” Too many really bad possibilities come to mind.

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing. The girls have been doing some job for Doctor Sevik, and they're almost done, and now he's locked them in the workshop."

“She told me she was working on some secret project. She and the Skylanders.”

“The who?”

“The other girls. They’re cleaning old jewelry or something.”

“I didn’t know that. That’s not good.”

“What’s not good, Konsta?”

“If they were working on something worth a lot of money, and now they’re done . . . . And this professor— "

"Kvek."

"I guess so. He's gone. It’s not good.”

“Konsta. You know you put her there, right?”

“I know.”

“Do you want her to die?”

“No. I mean she’s a pain, but I don’t want her to die.”

“Is this your main number?”

“Yes.”

“OK. I’m going to call you back in a little while.”

“Don’t call me. I don’t want to hear from you.”

“You called me, Konsta. That’s good. I know you want to do the right thing. And we can get Yesenya out, but you have to help. Right?”

Konsta doesn’t click off.

“You can help. You can save Yesenya.”

“Call me at ten,” he tells her.

The girls sleep on the floor of a storage space off the main workroom. Nimmatob notices they don’t eat— not just lunch, but hardly anything at all. When he reports this to Sevik, the Doctor says, "Never mind. After the festival, we won’t need them any more."

● Anxious

The Zimaras are trying to finalize their plans. They meet around a table in the basement of the former Bank of Kavkaz, now HQ for the Kavkaz Community Co-op. The original idea was grab and run. Get the girls coming off work, wrap them in new clothes and ID, hustle them out with the stream of pilgrims, and get them off the mountain fast. They would use a separate set of vans for the women at the Nunnery. That would be challenge enough. Now the girls are locked underground, and things are even more complicated.

Filipa worries that the new plan has too many moving parts. "Too many things can go wrong. We can't do all these tasks."

Zimara challenges her. "What can we take away?"

"It's too hard to get the girls and the women from the Nunnery both. Let's focus on Yesenya."

Emiliye agrees. "Yes, what about that? Come back for the others later."

"We made promises."

"At your insistence," Filipa counters. "How many times have you reminded us, we should not make promises we cannot keep."

"You know there will never be a better time. After this the Crusaders will be on high alert for months. Kulkhiz will seal the border." There's no good way to dispute that.

A little later, Zimara asks Filipa about the Skylanders. "So what happens if Sevik brings them out in one of the Clear Sparkling trucks? Do we know where to stop them? How many people do you need?"

"There are a couple possibilities. We don't know yet which route they'll take to Djemdjad. We would need a safehouse. And then— "

"You don't know?" Zimara interrupts. "You've had weeks. Do I have to do everything myself?"

"That's what I'm telling you," Filipa fires back. "There are too many variables. It's dangerous."

Fuming, Zimara ends the meeting a few minutes later and leaves. She hoists her backpack and slaps on the headphones and walks and walks, letting the sound of Haleesa Sladek Seerchay seep into her troubled mind. Everyone in Kavkaz knows her, and when passersby smile and wave, Zimara makes herself smile in response. It's hard for her to think straight. She is very angry with herself.

After Zimara leaves, several of the prihvadji stay to talk. They don't like how Zimara has been acting lately. They are surprised and worried.

"What's with Zee?" Katerin asks.

Filipa says, "I've never seen her act this way."

Arasely says, "She knows you were right. We have taken on too much. If something happens to Yesenya, Zimara will never forgive herself."

"Neither will I," says Filipa.

● Volunteers

The last meeting before the festival Afiza tells Filipa that she won't be escaping with the others.

"We probably won't be back," Filipa points out.

"You'll still need people here to watch these assholes. I can do that."

"Me, too," Shkeepay adds. She links one arm in Afiza's. "I'm staying, too."

Filipa is surprised. "You know, we can bring Goranka. Don't say anything now. But you grab her at the last minute. She'll follow you."

Afiza laughs. "Goranka don't follow anyone. Anyhow, we're satisfied to stay here. Yes?" She pats Shkeepay's hand. She fumbles in a pocket and holds up the comm Nisibis gave her. "We'll talk. You'll see, it will be all right."

Nisibis appeals to the other women, the ones who will make the break. “Can you do anything with them?”

‘We’ve tried,” says one. “Meeyadz women— stubborn donkeys.” Nisibis nods; it’s true.

Filipa warns, “After this, the Crusade will sew Hidris up tight. Anyone left here, they’ll watch you every minute. They’ll beat you worse than before. You should come with us now.”

Shkeepay says, “You kill Brother Michael. Then we can all go home.”

Halevy’s crew arrives amid pilgrim throngs. Their outlandish haircuts proclaim them barbers; also the carts they push, cluttered with grease, brushes, shears and mirrors. They wave festival banners and wear souvenirs from the monastery. By and by they’ll head down the road toward the old mine.

As for hardware, that’s easy: the smuggler Pavl makes the rounds of the armaments shops lining the main street —the dealers know him well— and instead of dispatching his haul off to Rudeny, as usual, this time he simply stores it in a warehouse by the ravine. “Nice,” Halevy’s men say when they see their shiny toys. “Better than what we get from Saray.”

● Promise Broken

The day before the festival, the girls can hear horns and firecrackers in the alleys above the workshop. They have been loading the truck for days. It's almost full.

"Good job," Sevik tells them. "One more batch and we’ll be done. Tomorrow you can come with us to Djemdjad. We’ll have ice cream."

"Can we take our prizes?" Gabriyela asks.

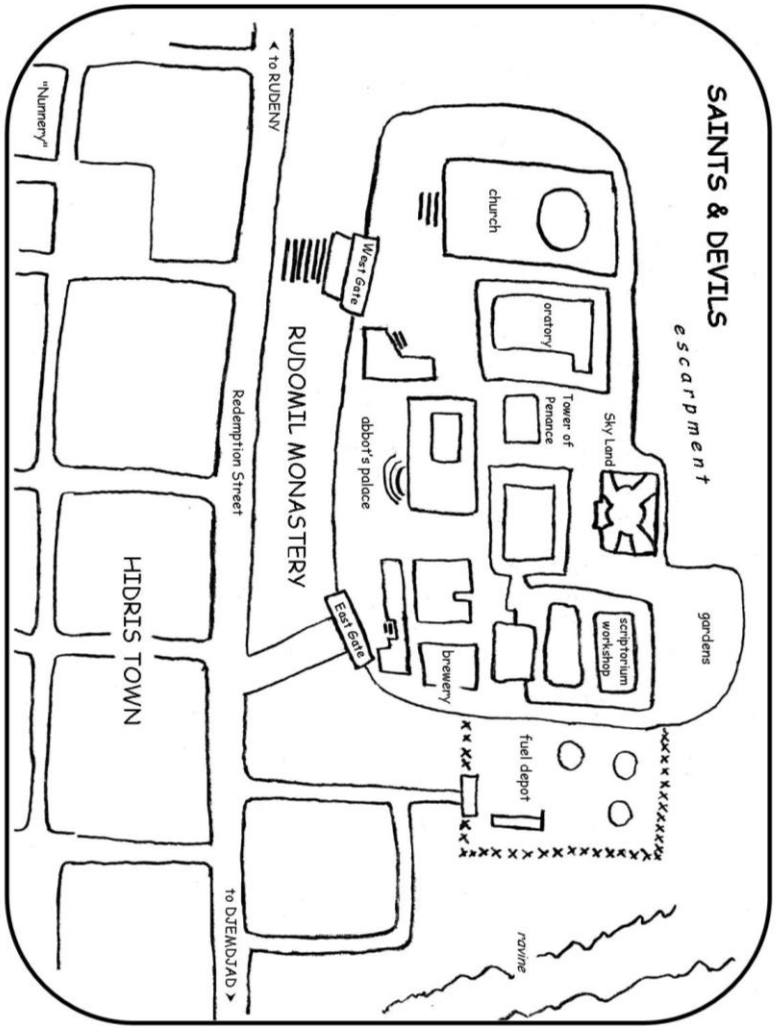
Sevik frowns. "Prizes?"

Nimmatob reminds him: Sevik promised the girls prizes if they did a good job. Each has picked a wonderful artifact and set them aside on the top shelf, with their names on cards with flowers drawn in crayon. Vlasta has picked one out for Emrush, too. The girls wrapped Taline’s special, in the best paper, with bows.

Sevik remembers now. "Sure, prizes. Of course you can take them."

When they look at the end of the day, though, their prizes are gone, boxed up with all the rest.

Vlasta sits on the floor and cries. “I’ll never see Emrush again.” Yesenya sits down beside her and wonders what Taline would say to make her feel better.



● Saints

Dawn breaks clear and cool, clouds scudding overhead as sleepy pilgrims, hungover from last night's party, steaming cups in trembling hands, dodge gutters still awash from the overnight storm. Atop buildings and stoplights banners, torn free, flap dry. The side-street factories have closed, so for once no noxious haze smothers Hidris. Instead, stinks of incense and exhaust fumes fill the air, and the beeps and blats from horns, whistles, drums and clackers, as marchers assemble by their floats and palanquins, some still putting the finishing touches on displays and costumes. Voices rise and fall like the grate of rusty hinges, as choirmasters coax their flocks into trying out their festival songs with phlegm-coated throats.

Guild members line up behind statues of their patron saints, as they have been doing for centuries, despite how much their industries have changed. For instance, the Iconmakers Guild now includes the town's pornographers; Cleaners and Sweepers represent the electronics recycling places; Barbers and Physicians the fake medicine factories; Leatherworkers the brothels. Each bears gifts: new statues or icons to be placed in the shrines, their guilds' specialty products for the monks, and of course ceramic saints stuffed full of cash.

Each float fitted more or less securely to the bed of a truck is a lavish montage in plastic and plaster: scenes from church history, saints' lives, famous conquests and conversions. Clear Sparkling water corporation has a particularly spectacular display: a robot priest at an outsize baptismal fount shaking

rainbow-colored holy water onto bystanders. CS also sponsors the biggest arch over Redemption Street, depicting a mountain stream sparkling like diamonds, and a gigantic bearded figure hovering above, hands raised in blessing. It proclaims, "Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters."

Peddlers hawk coffee, meth and candied popcorn in little paper cones, and scuffle for the best street corners. At the edge of the swarm two burly monks, skirts raised in their fists, chase a souvenir vendor who hasn't bought a permit. The impudent entrepreneur weaves in and out of the crowd with ease, one arm held high to keep his bag of acrylic figurines from collision damage. As they have done every year for the last seven hundred, the pious gather now to celebrate the Sacrifice of Sankt Rudo Turkslayer with as much pomp and display as they can muster.

The Zimaras have come, too, posted at every corner, in billowing costumes as angels or devils. Robes and masks conceal all manner of hardware. The women dress as men. So do the men. Larger groups linger in side streets, in storefronts along the route, and in trucks behind wrought-iron gates. Inside the monastery Filipa and her crew slip through the crowds, searching for Yesenya and the Skylanders.

A watery sun emerges by eight, in time for the oompahs that signal the start of the procession. The devotees will parade up Redemption Street to the plaza below Rudomil's grand West Gate, where they'll be blessed by the Abbot and Archbishop Eddie, and harangued by Brother Michael and the Crusader high command.

Floats and marchers edge into line under the direction of the monks, who tolerate no disputes about precedence. Well scrubbed, lightly armed Crusader boys in uniform, fresh and clean as cherubs, form up in small units. Up ahead, a gaggle of dancing demons lead the parade, followed by Abbot Torkim on a throne atop the cab of a pickup truck, flogging them with an electronic whiplash. With each stroke he generates a cascade of sparks and a sharp cracking sound.

The dancing devils stop at every cross street, pumping hips and arms, blowing horns, stamping their feet to jangle the bells on their ankles, thrusting fannies like pistons. It's the only time obscenity is permitted in public —aside from murder, that is— and the crowd loves it. The lead demon doffs its mask only to reveal a smaller mask beneath, even more grotesque. Holding the big mask at arms' length, it jumps high and hoots, pretending to be frightened at its own visage, and flings the ugly face to the curb, where it chatters with red and blue fireworks. The other monsters toss candies to the onlookers, devilish temptations they will not resist.

Behind the Abbot's vehicle shuffle ten men and women in dirty clothes too big for them, flanked by four Crusaders with spray guns. Heads bowed, hands clasped as if in prayer, they might be hermit monks, till you notice the plastic ties round their wrists. Also, one of them is a black man, not the usual sight in these parts. It's Doctor Nzangiye. He and three of the others belong to Commander Gloria, taken in her glorious raid on Hadzych, and paraded here as a rebuke to the hapless Crusader captains who lately have suffered too many defeats. Brother Michael can't let Gloria hog all the attention, so he contributed another half dozen sinners.

Placards hung from the prisoners' necks proclaim, Vengeance is mine. I bring not peace but a sword. Depart from Me, damn you, into everlasting fire! In addition, extra-biblical commentary: I turned my back on Jesus. Slave of sin. God offered me his hand, and I spit on it. I spit on the Heavenly Father.

Bodily fluids are a big thing with the Crusaders.

The captives will be given the chance to kneel, confess, beg forgiveness, and be received into the communion of the faithful. Of course, if they persist in their rebellion . . . . The archangel has prepared an exemplary extinction for the intransigent, but he hopes high value captives like Nzangiye will be sensible. Not to disappoint the crowd, he has added more expendable local apostates to this parade.

Including a new guy, a pudgy blonde. Nzangiye has not seen this man before, certainly not in the dripping depths of the copper mine where the Crusade keeps its hostages. Must have been newly acquired— he keeps his head down, like the rest, beady eyes darting side to side, but there's an

impatient spring in his step not quite consistent with someone who has been starved and beaten and may be shot within the hour. The doctor experiences a thrill of hope— could it be the Zimaras are going to try a rescue? Nzangiye looks at the guarding escort, wondering if they have noticed this man. To his surprise, the closest Crusader seems to be watching the newcomer closely, alert but without alarm.

From the crowded sidewalks, Lalekshany and others also watch, and count the hostages as they go by. At corners and in alleyways along the route, Arasely and others rest on motorbikes, waiting.

Just behind the hostages, a pickup truck bears Commander Gloria and the Crusader babes, so tight in their pink kerchiefs and bulging belts of grenades. Married to Jesus, they call themselves. You can explode me anytime, Mama! They've gobbed their lips fire engine red, Luscious for the Lord.

They have brought along a special guest, Taline the holy girl, who is just strong enough to sit upright in a chair upholstered with cushions sewn like puffy angels. Taline waves at her admirers. She too notices the blonde captive just ahead. She has seen him before in the workroom below the scriptorium; one of Sevik's brutes. Did he piss off the Doctor?

One more group to note in our parade, the cleaning women from Vyolka's barracks. As Archbishop Eddie never tires of pointing out, the Crusade is a family values program, and you can tell by the enslaved women marching behind Commander Gloria.

Ksaynay spots Nisibis in the crowd, and passes on the news with gestures. Nisibis holds up a sign in the shape of a pill bottle— she means the Guild of Barbers and Physicians. One by one the cleaning women fall back, until they're marching close to the truck carrying the GB&P float.

• Devils

As the marchers approach West Gate, the Abbot cracks his whip with ever more ferocity. The lead demon uncoils a knotted cord from its forearm, spins and pretends to lash the Abbot. Torkim jumps back, though he's meters away, atop a truck. The crowd roars with laughter. This is the liveliest demon they have seen in years.

Taline, too, has fans in this crowd. They wave and cheer as she goes by, and she calls out to them. Commander Gloria hands her a PA. Taline starts to preach, and the parade moves so slowly, each of the spectators along the way can catch part of what she's saying. "Purge the land of wickedness! Make it clean again!" she exhorts.

What every One True holds dear. "Wash it clean!" they chant.

"Too long have they held sway, these false prophets and their sick perversions," she tells them. Her audience couldn't agree more: the westernizers, the scientists, the governments, the democrats, all the forces that overturn the way the world is meant to be.

"The liars and hypocrites," Taline yells. "Burn them with fire!"

"Burn them with fire!" they roar. "You tell them, Taline," a man shouts.

"All these things you say you do for Jesus. You're really doing them just for yourselves, aren't you? You think Almighty God can't look into your heart and see your lies?" Taline pauses to catch her breath.

"'These false prophets are lying in my name. I didn't send them. I will consume these prophets by sword and famine.'" Thanks to her monkish handlers, by now Taline has heard enough Bible verses to recite them more or less recognizably. "And it's not just false prophets, but anyone who listens to them. 'The people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out into the streets of Jerusalem, killed by sword and famine, with none to bury them.'"

Wait a minute. Till now Gloria has not been paying attention. Fire and brimstone, that's what you expect from these holy shouters, but as the words sink in the cheers subside into a puzzled murmur.

Taline resumes: "'You walk against me, and I will walk against you in fury. I will chastise you seven times for your sins. You will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters.'" The spectators shuffle uneasily, and so do the women Married to Jesus, standing behind the holy girl.

Gloria leans over. "Lighten up, kid. You're killing the mood."

"'I will destroy your high places, and cast down your idols, and throw your carcasses on your smashed idols," Taline calls out. "'I will lay waste your cities and desolate your sanctuaries— '"

"Enough," says Gloria, and tries to wrest the mike from Taline's hands. They tussle for a moment, the woman nearly dragging the girl off her seat. "Let her speak," someone shouts from the crowd, but now Gloria has the device.

"Let's hear it now, folks. Praise the Lord for our own little Taline the Holy Sacrifice." She looks around. No one is praising.

Taline shouts, "'Whoever hurts a child, better to hang a stone around his neck and drop him into the sea.'" She has a high fluty voice, but it carries well even amidst all the noise of the parade. She is driving Gloria crazy.

Torkim's driver slows and stops just below the grand stairway and the terrace where Nagahry and the holy warriors wait. Here's where the dancing devils will run up the steps, to be slain one by one by the Archbishop wielding his heavy silver crucifix. Then the infidel captives will be made to kneel and denounce their sins, and Michael and Doctor Sevik will take turns shooting the insincere. Finally, exalted, the rest of the marchers will pass by, group by group, to offer up their gifts and receive in turn Nagahry's blessing.

But not yet. Gloria's truck stops, too, and the marching multitude file around it to fill the plaza. Now Taline's long outburst is really a problem. Gloria doesn't want the Archbishop or, worse, Michael Modrek to notice this unruly display. She doesn't know Michael has scripted an alternative ending, and he wants Eddie Nagahry to see.

"OK, Taline, that's enough." Gloria grabs the girl by the shoulders. Frail but furious, Taline wriggles free and kicks over the chair. "Let go, bitch!" she yells, and swinging both fists knocks Gloria backwards over the side of the truck. Taline drops over the other side, a little wobbly, and pushes away.

Hearing the commotion, the captives ahead turn around to look. The new guy, the blonde, seems particularly upset. He sees the preacher girl, threading through the crowd. Where is Gloria? Flem shucks the fake wrist tie, summons the nearest Crusader guard and takes his gun. He advances through the throng, gun raised. People squirm out of his way. Nzangiye figures this is no rescue operation, and grabs Flem's arm. The Crusader shakes him off, shoots into the air, and then into people. Behind him, weak and dazed, Nzangiye stumbles and nearly falls. Flem catches sight of Taline by the stairway, and aims.

Arasely slams the motorbike into him with a juicy crunch, running up the back of his legs while his head and torso snap back over the front wheel. Arasely catapults into the onlookers, bowling them over like tenpins. Nzangiye helps her up, leaving patches of elbow on the pavement. Meanwhile man and machine have skidded across the road into the metal frame of a festival banner; a shoulder, a wheel, and Flem's face pop through the crossbars. God's hit man looks disappointed but not surprised.

It takes a minute for Gloria to understand what's happening. She crouches behind the truck and yells at her squad: "Shoot! Shoot!" They spray into the crowd. Gloria takes off the other way. Was she the target? She's got to think this through.

One of the devils in front leaps up onto the lead truck, while others drag the driver out of the cab. Torkim struggles a moment until Mandalika drops a nylon loop over his head and tugs hard.

"How do you feel about swallowing?" she murmurs in his ear. "For or against?"

The Abbot can't help but swallow hard. It hurts. He decides to stop flailing around.

Taline has spotted Doctor Sevik, and streaks up the steps like a demented hare.

● Fire

On the other side of the monastery, just outside the east wall, two Crusaders sit under a tin roof by the gate to the fuel depot. They drink and play cards, thankful for once not to be supervised, and doubly thankful not to have to march across town and back. Behind them snooze a row of trucks between two squat gray cylinders ten meters across, filled to the brim with petrol.

When two grimy pilgrims set down on the street in front of them, the guards call out to them to move on. The bigger traveller wears boots. The smaller one has wrapped her feet in rags. "An offering, sirs? An offering for the Saint?" the man begs.

"Get lost," the guard says.

Wearily they help each other up, and cross the street, and plunk down on the wall of a drainage ditch. The little one is limping. One of the Crusaders shakes his head and comes out of the gate.

"You can't stay here."

"It's my wife, sir." Tenderly, the man takes the woman's feet in his lap and begins to peel off the dirty rags. They are stained brown and yellow, and stink like something dead.

"O," the Crusader says, and slaps a hand to his nose.

"We're leaving shortly," Nayeda says, and shoots the nearby soldier, then takes aim and shoots the one inside the fence. She pulls on her boots while Jaafar's brothers race around the corner to join them. They get inside the gate and assemble a rocket launcher. Just now they hear distant gunfire. Mandalika calls to give the go-ahead. Samir kneels to aim the rocket.

"Wait!" Jaafar tugs at his brother's collar. Jaafar goes to the guard shed, pushes the other dead soldier out of his chair, and sets it under the security camera. He reaches up and turns the camera to the fuel trucks parked under the monastery wall. "Watch this," he purrs into the camera, and gives the thumbs up to his brother.

The rocket flares and swoops into a truck, with a satisfying thump. Samir throws up his arms and shouts, "Woo Hoo!" He dances like a bead of water on a hot skillet. His brothers drag him back across the road where they drop into the ditch to watch the show. They feel the heat a hundred meters away. The fuel tanks and the other trucks will erupt any minute.

Nope. The one truck flares enticingly, but has no one to play with. An angry buzz arises from atop the monastery wall, then shot clatters against the ground near the saboteurs.

"Fuck your mother," Samir suggests, and runs back to retrieve the launcher, trailed by little spouts of dirt. He starts to fit on a second rocket.

"Get back here, you numskull!" Jaafar yells, and Samir complies, precipitately, as the shock wave hits him. The coy fuel tanks have joined the fun at last. Just in time, Nayeda and her brothers tuck their heads in their arms, and so don't see the tide of flame splash against the monastery like a storm surge against a sea wall, followed by coils of black smoke rearing like an angry cobra from its hiding place.

Spitting and coughing but well screened now, two of the brothers tug Samir to his feet. He's lost some hair but he can see. They regroup three blocks away. They can't hear. With gestures Jaafar points them down the mountain toward Tyvrdav, where they know Halevy's unit can use their help.

● Stairway to Heaven

Just as gunfire breaks out by the Married to Jesus truck, the costumed devils start up the grand stairway toward the Crusader lords assembled. The demon chief flings off her mask and raises a gun.

From his throne atop the stairway Nagahry goggles at the woman with the slashed cheek. He has seen her face before. Yes, the posters Gloria put up everywhere. They've all seen them: the bandit Zimara. "To hell, Satan!" he commands, half rising and swinging his crucifix like a scythe.

Zimara points her weapon at him. “Suit yourself!” she promises. Entangled in his heavy robes, Nagahry stumbles and topples backwards as bullets slam into the base of his throne. Behind Zimara the other devils throw off their capes and unsling their weapons. They are firing before the soldiers on the steps can react. Monks and angel boys drop to the stone floor of the terrace. They take fire from Zimaras on rooftops across the street, too. Greb’s got Brother Michael behind a column fast chipping away in the hail of bullets.

“My face!” howls Michael, spluttering blood between his fingers. Slivers of stone have flensed his nose and upper lip; a pretty face no more. The Sergeant-Major rolls grenades down the grand stairway, disassembling other Crusaders, but also keeping the Brigade at bay.

Then there’s a bigger blast, from farther away. Those in the street can see the column of smoke blooming in the east. The next explosions they can feel. “It’s the depot. They’ve taken out the fuel tanks,” Greb explains to Brother Michael, who doesn’t give a shit.

It’s Sevik who Zimara needs. He kneels behind a couple of sobbing boys of the Crusader choir. Zimara climbs the steps, firing steadily. Sevik tries to prop up the boys, but they fall away and he’s exposed. He gets to his feet and backs away, shooting at Zimara and missing. From one side Taline launches at him, biting and scratching like some crazed arthropod caught in his underwear. She won’t let go. Sevik has a moment of panic, until he manages to smash an elbow into her face; she slides off like a broken backpack. Then Zimara trips him and straddles him and shoves her gun into his mouth.

“Where is she?”

“RRRR?” he wonders.

“Yesenya, where is she, fucker?” Zimara lets him speak.

“Who?” Sevik doesn’t know who she’s talking about. Back goes the gun. She twists the barrel, slashing his mouth and breaking his teeth.

Greb comes up behind her and aims a killing blow at Zimara’s neck. He nearly breaks his hand on the heavy wooden collar she put on to hold up the mask. She rolls off Sevik, stunned, and her gun clatters down the steps. When she locates Greb he’s got one hand on Taline’s throat and the other on his slashed left eye. Then his master calls. He flings the girl away and hurries to Brother Michael. They hobble through West Gate, into the monastery. Nagahry and Sevik are long gone.

Taline sprawls on the steps almost upside down. Her ears ring, the sky is kind of smudgy, and she finds it hard to breathe. She feels sleepy. Someone hovers over her.

“Taline, Taline. Stick with us, baby.”

“Did you get him? Did you get Sevik?”

• Ascend Descend

The Crusaders have paved over the Abbot’s garden for a helicopter pad. Sevik is running out of the Tower of Penance, file cache slung over his shoulder, when he sees the copter land and Greb and Brother Michael scramble aboard. Sevik staggers against the rotor wash and reaches up a hand. “Help me up,” he shouts, spraying blood from his broken mouth.

Michael is not too kindly disposed to his security chief right at this moment. He lashes out with his ninja feet. Since Michael’s eyes are mashed shut, Sevik dodges easily. The doctor is determined not to be left behind. He gets an arm around the metal leg of a seat. "Help me!" he begs.

"Shoot him!" Michael shrieks. Sergeant Major Greb leans forward and rests a gun barrel on Sevik’s forehead.

“You bring the Hoard to Djemdjad.”

“Plekh is taking care of that.”

"You take care of it!" Greb taps Sevik on the cheek, splitting it, and the doctor falls back. "Go!" Greb shouts, and the copter rises and twirls through towers of smoke to Djemdjad.

More gunplay at West Gate. The Zimaras are breaking in. Now there's only one way out for Sevik. He turns and runs through the next courtyard.

"What's he doing?" Zimara wonders. "The scriptorium is on the other side of the monastery." She, Taline, Arasely and six more of the dancing devils have made it inside West Gate.

Taline explains about the Abbot's Ears. "They've got tunnels all through here. He can go to the scriptorium or anywhere else."

"Right," Zimara says. "Taline, you take Arasely and show her the way. Make sure Sevik can't backtrack or exit. You," she points to the others, "we are going to run. I want to get there before Sevik does." She comms Filipa, tells her they're on their way. They start running.

Sevik unlocks a maintenance door and scuttles down the steps. The tunnel is dark and narrow; he slows to a fast walk. He calls Plekh. "The girls— what about the girls?"

"What? Who's this?" Sevik's speech is kind of garbled, what with his busted mouth and all. He has to repeat the question.

Plekh is a little defensive. "Did Nimma screw up again? He said you said to wait until Djemdjad. I'll take care of them right now."

"No! I need them, understand? You wait till I get there."

"I thought you were going with Brother Michael."

"You wait till I get there!" Sevik sounds like he's being strangled.

"Well, um, come fast, Doctor. Someone torched the fuel depot and it's getting hard to breath down here. I don't know what it's like up top."

To Nimmatob, Plekh says, "I wish he'd make up his mind."

Nimmatob says nothing. He doesn't like the way Plekh tried to blame him.

● Gates Not Pearly

Up top it's poisonous. Black smoke curls over the top of the east wall and pours down again like a waterfall, to billow through the narrow alleys of the monastery. Filipa's team have staked out the scriptorium from the loggia across the street, and now Zimara joins them. They have covered their faces with scarves or towels, but they can't stay here long. A fence topped with razor wire encloses the entrance to the scriptorium, but the women can see inside. The Crusaders have knocked down a wall to make room for a loading dock, and there's a truck parked in front. Two of Sevik's thugs man a gun pit inside the gate. Lost soldiers, monks and pilgrims run up and down the street, coughing and crying. There seems to be some kind of hold up at East Gate, a couple of blocks and around the corner from where the Zimaras hide.

The problem is, when the battle started at West Gate, marchers and onlookers rushed back down Redemption Street toward East Gate and the factory district. That cleared the way for Mandalika to lead the rescued women and the main force of Zimaras westward toward the Rudeny border. But now the fuel depot is burning so fiercely it has blanketed the east side of town with smoke, blocking the road to Djemdjad and forcing the crowd to turn around. Burning fuel flows into the ravines like lava, igniting decades' accumulation of toxic waste. The mob trying to escape the monastery through East Gate runs into the mob surging past outside.

A skinny kid crouches next to Filipa, t-shirt tied over nose and mouth, cradling a little boy in his lap.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” Zimara asks.

“You know me. I’m Konsta.”

“You’re Konsta?” It’s been a long time since she’s seen him. He looks smaller than he did from the floor of a car.

“Hi, Zimara.” He keeps his eyes down, as well he might.

"The child?"

"This is Emrush. Can you wave hello, Emrush?" The toddler lifts his hand uncertainly.

"Vlasta's brother."

"Yussup told me to take care of him." Konsta seems surprised and proud.

Zimara thinks Yussup must be crazy. “Yesenya told me about the workroom. Have you been down there?”

He shakes his head. “But Yussup says it’s down a long hall with lots of turns.”

“That’s why we didn’t go in,” Filipa says. “I was afraid we couldn’t reach them in time.”

“Yes. We’ll have a better chance when they come out. Where is this Yussup?”

“He took the pickup to East Gate. He’s going to follow the truck.”

“OK, good.” Zimara comms Arasely, who says Sevik is still somewhere ahead of them in the Abbot's Ears passageway. “Listen. Stop before you get to the scriptorium. We don’t want a shoot-out inside. Let them bring the girls out.” She tells Arasely to come to the loggia instead.

Sevik knows someone is following him. He calls Plekh again. “Have your guys at the loading dock look around. We may have company.”

The guards on the other side of the fence scan with binoculars, then talk into their comms.

“They’ve seen us,” Konsta says. Weapons in hand, the guards unlatch the gate and swing it open. Across the street Sevik emerges from a doorway and streaks through the gate. Two minutes later Arasely and Taline come out. Keeping close to the buildings, they make their way to the women inside the arcade. Taline is zoned out again. Arasely props her against a column like a stringless puppet.

● Promised Land

The main force of Zimaras heads west in a motley convoy of cars and trucks, Mandalika with Abbot Torkim in the bed of the lead vehicle. The rescued cleaning crew and other escapees from Hidris have commandeered the truck of the Guild of Barbers and Physicians, and cling precariously to the festival platform. They drive slowly so as not to get too far ahead of the mass of pilgrims on foot and packed tight on floats behind them, the gaudy banners and decorations burned or torn. A thick twist of smoke rises high over Ullaq Pass.

Crusaders and a handful of Kulkhizan soldiers man the border post, shifting nervously as they watch the flood of people pour down the mountain. Another horde appears to the west, just across the line in Rudeny. Looks like about a hundred tanks with infantry columns spread on both sides of the road. The Rudeny Army took Obeyyed at dawn and have been racing eastward since.

Mandalika's pickup stops before the barrier, and she gives Torkim a good poke in the kidneys. The Abbot stands and spreads his arms as if in benediction.

"Brothers!" he tells the border guards. "Join us!" He gestures to the thousands streaming down the mountain. "God's Army! We have come to liberate Rudeny."

The numb and weary pilgrims look more like refugees. The soldiers note, however, a half dozen trucks with Zimaras piled on top, bristling with weapons. Sergeant Tomislav looks at the monk, looks back at Rudeny Army, looks at Mandalika standing behind Torkim. "Go with God!" he shouts, and waves for the barrier to lift. Ksaynay and the other freed women wave and cheer as they go past, and gesture rudely.

• Ax Salvation

Sevik pushes Yesenya out onto the loading dock, a gun to the base of her neck. He looks across to the loggia to make sure Zimara and the others see him. Yesenya looks around dazedly, as if she hasn't seen daylight in a long time. The other girls come out, gasping in the smoky air, followed by Plekh, Nimmatob and two more of the Submit killers. They launch the Skylanders into the back of the truck and slam shut the cargo door and get into the double cab themselves. The guards by the fence fling open the gate and spray the street with bullets to scatter the stream of panicked pilgrims and suppress fire from the women on the other side. Crouching behind a column, Zimara sees the Clean Sparkling logo as the truck tears down the block: a fist around a glistening bottle pouring a rainbow onto bulbous red and white lips, teeth, tongue.

The truck lurches almost to a crawl, however, at the corner, where the terrified mob can't get out of its way fast enough. It climbs over bodies and drops again, starting and stopping. While Filipa and others return fire into the yard of the scriptorium, Zimara and Arasely use the loggia as cover to run toward the truck. They want to get ahead of it so they can shoot Sevik and the driver. They see Sevik lean out the window with a machine gun. They drop to the pavement as he fires in their direction, punching holes in a group of monks cowering by a statue.

Konsta has been bumping along behind them with a big canvass sack slung over his shoulder. He stops at a crosswalk, kneels and opens the sack.

"What the hell is that?" Zimara shouts.

"Laser guided!" he announces cheerfully. "I stole it!" He unfolds a little metal stand and fixes to it a squat rocket. Zimara has heard of these. You can launch them from behind a wall so long as someone has line of sight for about ten seconds, no launcher required. Just as well; this one is about twice too big to fit the standard launchers. Konsta points the guide box at the faltering truck, where a spot of red wavers on the cargo door.

Zimara grabs his wrist. "You'll hit the girls!" The truck heaves around the corner and out of sight.

In a minute, though, they hear a crash. When they get to the next street, they see that Yussup has crashed his pickup into the cab of the Clean Sparkling truck, which smashed into another arcade and stopped. The men in the mangled cab pour bullets into the pickup till the door pops open and the old man spills to the street like a torn sack of oatmeal. Then Sevik and the others pile out behind the pickup and fire back down the street, forcing the Zimaras to take cover again. The women fire off a few rounds but they can't return fire effectively for fear of hurting the girls in the cargo section. Crusaders and monks and pilgrims run in all directions, slipping on the blood-streaked cobbles, stumbling over bodies.

"Filipa! Zimara!" An impossible voice. Zimara looks back from her position at the corner of a building. There, heads bobbing above cars and crouching pilgrims, the Skylanders make their way to the Zimaras. They are well out of the line of fire from the trucks. Filipa is nearest and grabs Yesenya and pulls her close. Zimara hurries back to the girls. They are all there. Nika runs to Taline. Vlasta grabs Emrush and twirls him around.

"They locked you in the truck!" Zimara points out.

Yesenya holds up a serrated ceremonial axhead almost as long as herself. It has the shape of a lion's massive paw, once the token of authority for a proud nomad chief. Two of the claws have busted off. "We chopped through the floor and dropped out when they slowed down," Yesenya explains.

Zimara hugs her tight and passes her back to Filipa. Then she beckons Konsta to the corner where Arasely and the others are keeping Sevik's men pinned down.

"How do you work this thing?" Konsta sets up the rocket and gives her the box. She points it at the crumpled juncture of Yussup's pickup and the bigger truck's cab. Sevik fires over the hood of the pickup. Zimara squeezes the guidance box. The front ends of both trucks dissolve in a boil of flame and

angry metal. Bits of organism drip from walls and columns far down the street. No more shooting; nothing more to shoot at.

The Zimaras regroup the next block over. "How do we get out of here?" Zimara asks Taline.

"I'll show you," Yesenya says, and girls and women and Konsta head back toward the Abbot's Ears passageway.

It takes them the better part of an hour to emerge on the slopes below the monastery, and then a hike through the forest to a clearing just big enough for a copter. Nayeda and her brothers have gotten there already with a dozen escapees from the copper mine at Tyvrdav, and Halevy's unit is a few minutes away with a hundred more. They are still arriving when Kut lands. The Colonel stays while the copter lifts twelve at a time to the Rudeny border. Yesenya wants to stay with her sister and Zimara, but they make the Skylanders leave first with injured soldiers.

Four jets fly far overhead. Kut, hand to his ear, nods and tells Zimara, “Kulkhiz fighters.” They take one turn and peel back over the mountain. Someone in Djemdjad wants no part of this mess.

Mandalika is waiting for Zimara when the copter lands at dawn. The Fight Chief has been working through the night, making sure the wounded get swift transport to Saray. Too many casualties, she tells Zimara. The Crusaders came out worse.

● Rescue at Sea

The mighty Rudeny navy —a trio of second-hand pocket destroyers with brand new rocket arrays— stops the *Jasmine Breeze* off the Turkish coast and boards it. My, my. Stashed among the racks of timber torn from Kulkhizan forests are the remains of an ancient civilization, artifacts of astounding age and beauty. How come these are not listed in the manifest? No matter. Rudeny sailors just happen to have among them several high resolution cameras, and soon the images of these treasures flash around the world.

The lab coat cops of the AATC, reinforced by the Kut’s Political Police and a company of engineers from Rudeny Army, await in force as *Jasmine Breeze* puts into Saray harbor. Among many lines of inquiry: How did such a huge collection —likely the most significant in Kulkhiz history— make it out of that country under the noses of the authorities? A few days later some bashful but public-spirited citizen releases video of Clear Sparkling trucks unloading at the ship over a period of weeks. The antiquities world is agog, the tabloid press enchanted. It’s shaping up to be a real-life Tomb Raider story.

● Homecoming

Zimara has no wish to see Yorg dead. After the fight at Rudomil, she sends word to Yorg’s new wife Dubravka: We’re coming. She’ll count on Dubravka to lean on Yorg. Yorg tends to strut around, chest puffed out. Dubravka won’t put up with it. They are gone within the week, and everyone knows why.

Soon after, Arasely strolls into Echmash with two groups of fighters. Most of the Crusaders have turned tail, and those who could not, keep their heads down. The Crusader command system is still in disarray, and exposed units like Byedny's have fled back to Kulkhiz— Arasely’s husband among them. Filipa’s husband Todor won’t leave the farm, but he leaves her alone and keeps his mouth shut.

Konsta gets to return, based on his help in Hidris. The Brigade parole him to an uncle with no ties to the Crusade. The boy stays far away from Yesenya. He has decided women are too much trouble. Takes him months to change his mind.

The Skylanders have been gently parted, with many promises of reunion soon-- Nika to her home, Taline and Vlasta and Emrush to New Start camp, where Avbury will look after them until they can safely return to their families. Taline will need a lot of therapy yet, but now she doesn't mind as much being alive.

Yesenya goes home to Echmash with Filipa. The tales of her adventures make the rounds, embellished only slightly. Among local teens the characters Nika, Taline and Vlasta take on mythical proportions, and of course the ever-smiling baby boy renamed Lucky Emrush. Lots of girls can't wait to join the Brigade, but they are stymied by the new requirement that young applicants must be able to read and write. Their mothers make them go to school instead.

For Arasely homecoming is a joy. She has put aside the bitterness of her last trip here, and busies herself visiting neighbors, cooing over new babies, getting the low down on wool prices and winter wheat, and who is courting whom.

In two weeks the new village council is up and running. They plan to put a school into the old mayor's house. Two weeks after that, Zimara arrives with her children and Rekady.

Arasely has arranged a sort of welcoming reception at the covered market. The women in their booths watch Rekady drive up in a jeep. Zimara and the kids get out. Zimara brushes back Gret's hair and straightens Aloyzi's jacket. She pulls them close, and they march together into the market. Rekady follows a few steps behind, curious as to how Zimara will deal. She has been upset all morning.

The women stand shyly before their counters, hands on their children's shoulders, or where they've boosted the toddlers onto countertops, clutching their belts. A few men attend, too, babes on their shoulders. They all know Zimara. Sometimes she took care of their kids, and they hers. They know what happened to her, yet still feel shocked to see her face— one side so friendly and familiar, the other frozen in such terrifying beauty.

Zimara takes their hands in turn and murmurs a few words to each, but it's all very formal. A gulf has opened among these former neighbors. So many deaths, and Zimara's new power, manifest even in the way she walks.

Hana steps forward. Blunt as usual, and perhaps with less to lose than most —neither has forgotten how she warned Zimara not to interfere with the sale of Yesenya— she does a little curtsy and recites, "I want to say we are very sad about your troubles and very glad you've come back to Echmash with Gret and Aloyzi. It wasn't right, what happened, and we are proud of what you've done. We— " she hesitates, "I hope you can think of this as your home again."

Zimara cannot see for a moment. She squeezes Hana's hand hard, almost hurting her, hanging on as if to a sturdy tree branch projecting over a flash flood. The older woman stiffens but does not change her expression. These women's faces . . . all Zimara's fury pours into the bigger torrent of their suffering, their broken hearts and lives, the wounds they inflict on each other, their making the best of a bad deal, their hope new every day that they survive.

Gret tugs at her sleeve. Zimara lets go of Hana's hand, and thanks her. She looks around. "Thank you all."

Arasely and Filipa have been watching from the back of the crowd. Now they come to take Zimara's arms, as if escorting home a newly discharged patient. "I promised Zimara a good meal and a quiet evening," Arasely tells the others. "You'll see her again." The market women make way as Zimara's family returns to the jeep. They touch Zimara gently on shoulder and cheek as she passes by.

Zimara stays with Arasely, but Aloyzi and Gret have been badgering her to take them home; that is, to the house they grew up in. Zimara doesn't want to go. "I can take them," Rekady says, "Aloyzi can show me the way."

"Yeah!" Aloyzi seconds the motion. The boy spends his time at the farmhouse showing Rekady all his old hangouts: the turtle pond, the stick fort in the forest, his favorite goat. He finds the dragon kite his father made for him, but it's in tatters.

Gret wanders here and there, silent. She can't find the notepad she used to draw on; she remembers purple pigs and people with butterfly wings; she supposes Dubravka's kids have it. "It's different," is all she'll say.

Already the place is overgrown. A side window, broken, has been boarded over. Zimara has asked a neighbor to take care of the place till she decides what to do with it.

For days after, all Aloyzi will talk about is "When I get back home . . . ."

When Gret sees Zimara that night, she crawls into her lap and they sit that way a while.

Zimara attends a meeting of the new village council. She nods and smiles to encourage the new-hatched parliamentarians, otherwise says little. Mostly she just hangs out at Arasely's house. There's a lot of work to be done since Arasely's husband ran away. With the women gone, the place was going to hell even before that. A damaged drain undermines the kitchen wall and now Arasely and Zimara have to reset the blocks. Lazy Rekady takes the kids out riding while the women paint and plaster.

"You'll help me with my place, right?" she tells Arasely, but makes no plan to move there. Instead she comms every day with the Brigade Council in Kavkaz.

"How are they doing?" Arasely asks.

"Seem to be doing well."

"You trained them well."

§ BEREFT

● Zimara Is Not Ready

"It's OK if you don't want to stay in Echmash," Rekady assures Zimara. "I got a friend, he runs a taxi business on the coast. He's been asking me to help. And he tells me there's a house for sale, with a garage and a garden." Seeing no response, he keeps going. "What about the EU? We talked about this. Avbury can get you papers. You can set up a mask business. Genuine folk art! I can be your go-fer."

Zimara doesn't want to hear it. "There's this little matter of the Crusade."

"Sure, of course. I'm not saying we should stop fighting. But you don't have to stay in the thick of it, either. You've said many times how strong the Council has become, Mandalika and the rest. They can take the lead. And now they've got a lot of support from the government. All I'm saying is, you don't have to do it all any more." To which she does not reply.

● Trickle Down

Djemdjad's ruling generals catch a lot of flak for letting the Crusaders shoot up pilgrim week at Rudomil. Fires burn for days, razing half the shops in Hidris. Europe's gangsters scramble bloodily to find alternative suppliers. Kulkhiz blames it all on terrorists, of course, but except for Zimara herself and Mandalika, the Brigade fighters barely show up on the videos; they look like ordinary pilgrims. The jihadists, on the other hand— there's plenty of footage of frightened Dildos firing into the crowd.

Meanwhile demands pour in from all over the world for an investigation into the looting of the fabulous Hoard of the Khazars, and already the generals feel on their necks the hot breath of the Arts and Antiquities Trafficking Control, and the smouldering anger of the Kulkhizan people. Their government lays claim to the Hoard, part of the national patrimony and all, and blame unspecified foreign influences for the massive theft. They know they'd better produce a scapegoat, soon.

When Commander Gloria hears about the generals' shooting trip, she insists that Archbishop Eddie get himself an invitation.

"You know how I hate those things," he protests. "Old men farting and scratching their balls, bragging about how much money they've spent to blow away a bunch of birds. I kill infidels," he says, and thumps his chest, "what do I care about wild boar?"

"Spare me," she says. "Honestly, Eddie, I worry about you. You are losing your edge, and you can't afford to. Not now. It's not boar on the agenda, but you, and Michael, and the Crusade. They're going to talk about whether to stick with you or to cut their losses. You better be there. We want no cuts of any kind."

Nagahry knows she's right. They strategize about how to throw the blame on Brother Michael. Not so easy to do, since Eddie's middleman role has always been based on his claim that he can keep the Crusaders in line. On the other hand, the generals already loathe Michael for his arrogance and pretension. Fear him, too.

It's a dark forest under gloomy skies and Vice Admiral Vraymn strides far ahead, a little coterie of generals and aides-de-camp in his wake. Every so often Vraymn turns to one of the young men, requiring this or that fancy shotgun, and blows holes in the canopy. Then another young man dashes among the shadows and returns with a bloody bag. Vraymn checks the contents without expression, calls for a different gun, and resumes his Sherman's March through the forest.

Biologists at Djemdjad U. believe the Skylax Shrike has been extinct since the turn of the century, but there have been persistent reports of sightings in these parts. If there's even one of these birds left

alive, the Admiral aims to bag it. The other generals are blazing away at the trees as well, but they know better than to aim at anything that looks like the Skylax Shrike.

Judge Hokh tags along, too. He has been on many such expeditions, and keeps up very well for such an old man. He carries a shotgun in the crook of his arm but never shoots anything. Rather, he waits for instructions.

The Admiral has not yet summoned Eddie. He is going to make the Archbishop wait and ponder his sins. So Eddie has been walking with the porters who carry the coolers and hampers for the luncheon feast. Plus another exile, Diagonal Dorgu of Djemdjad, Nagahry's sometime rival for the affections and donations of the Kulkhiz faithful. After a long, awkward silence, they start talking. Under the circumstances, Eddie finds the Diagonal not such a bad fellow. After all, they've both been screwed by Michael Modrek. They say the many ways. They speculate as to what Vraymn has in store for the newly noseless holy warrior. Gunfire echoes through the woods. The bishops stop to take a leak.

"You, you'll be all right, though," Dorgu says.

"I'm not worried," Nagahry assures him. "What makes you say that?"

"Dvelko put in a good word for you. They'll pay attention to that."

"Commander Gloria?"

"The very. She's doing Vraymn, you know. Seems to like you, though, and thinks you can still be useful." Dorgu sighs with satisfaction and zips up. "Vraymn will pay attention. After all, your girlfriend is the last known Crusader to actually kill a Zimara."

Eddie never does get an audience with the Admiral. He tramps the woods for miles, falling farther and farther behind. When will they stop for lunch? By and by Judge Hokh makes his way back, and gives Eddie the word: Eddie's in, Michael's in, provided they take care of the Zimaras right away. Otherwise the generals will find someone else to run the holy war. Eddie correctly interprets this to mean that they are actively looking for replacements, and just have not found the right ones yet. He and Michael don't have much time.

● Zimara's Dream

Zimara and Arasely are trying to right an overturned tractor in Arasely's south lot. Arasely suspects her husband ran it into the ditch on purpose before he took off. They have rigged a chain around the undercarriage of the tractor, and Arasely is in the pickup, trying to pull gently. This is hard, because the pickup tends to spin wheels and fishtail in the mud. Zimara is by the tractor, shouting directions. They've been at it nearly an hour.

Now, once again, the tractor is edging backwards out of the ditch. One wheel drops suddenly, and the chain snaps against a mudguard, crumpling it. "Stop!" Zimara yells. She runs to the tractor and tugs hard with both hands to pull the chain off the mudguard. Arasely loses sight of Zimara and then sees her in the side view mirror. She yells at Zimara and puts the truck in neutral and stomps on the brake. The pickup slides backwards a little and stops. The chain holds the tractor half out of the ditch, but it slides back slowly as the chain cuts into the rusty metal.

When Arasely gets to her, Zimara is weeping and cursing and yanking on the chain with both hands, throwing back her whole body. Arasely shouts for her to stop. Zimara gives another mighty heave and slips in the mud and nearly slides under the wheels of the tractor. Arasely pulls her back out of the way. Both are very angry.

"What's wrong with you!" Arasely goes to the truck and turns it off.

Zimara sits in the mud, elbows on her knees, trying to catch her breath. Arasely comes back and sits next to her. "OK," Zimara says, and starts to stand. "Let's try it again."

Arasely pulls her back down. "Forget it."

"Let's finish the job. We started it, let's finish it."

"Right. And then I waste my time pulling you out of the ditch, trying to fit your arms back into your shoulders. I need a helper, not a madwoman."

Zimara stares at the machine, and through it. She pulls off her gloves. "I couldn't sleep," she says.

"I know. You woke me up. You were yelling."

"Sorry. I'm losing it." Arasely waits. "You know the dream I have," Zimara continues.

"The high wall, you called it. You like that dream. "

"Different this time. A wall or road suspended high above the countryside, leading to a horizon full of light. A little scary to walk along, so high up, but I knew I'd be OK as long as I paid attention. I felt like I could walk forever. . . .

"It's not that way any more. I can't see the ground, and the wall is crumbling. I put my foot down and I can feel the stone shift; little pieces fall off into the void. I can't see anything really except the stones, and it's like looking through a mountain stream. The wind is starting to build up, and I know it's going to get bad. I remember trying to say something, but it didn't make sense. I tried to shout but the wind took my breath away."

"Scary."

"I want to finish this work. Get it done, get it over with."

"We'll do it. Don't worry. We have borrowed your bravery, and we'll give it back when we're done."

Zimara says, "Let's finish this job," and nods toward the tractor.

"Hell, no," Arasely says. "A responsible person knows when to rest and regroup and try again later." Zimara doesn't want to argue. So they ease the tractor back into the ditch and go back to Arasely's house.

• What We Do for Love

Damyana is so happy to see Gloria Dvelko but the commander does not reciprocate. They are standing on their hillside overlooking the harbor at Besim Brod. The sunset purples a feathery flock of clouds. Damyana wants to sit and chat and hold hands like they used to, but Gloria is not staying.

"Zimara tried to kill me, and where were you? Hiding away!"

"I was helping my mom."

"What about me? I need help, too."

"You don't know what it's like, being with those people," Damyana says, referring to the Brigade. "They don't care about anything."

"So you stay here sulking, while Satan does his best to destroy the Crusade. Do you know how many priests and monks they killed while you were idling with your family, safe and sound?"

Damyana takes the Crusader's right hand into both of her own. "I didn't know. You have to believe me! How was I to know? I would never let them hurt you."

They gaze deep into each other's eyes. Gloria's free hand comes up and strokes Damyana's cheek. "Poor little girl. You couldn't know. They pushed you out because they fear you. And now you're all alone."

That's it. That's it exactly! Damyana tears up. She holds Gloria's hand against her cheek.

"The question is," the Crusader continues, "what do we do now? I would like to stay here, but I can't stay anywhere, not with that pack of devils on my trail. I'm ready to die for Jesus, but I don't want to put you in danger as well."

"I'll go back," Damyana promises.

"You mustn't. It's too dangerous."

"I'll go back. I want to help you."

"Will you? Will you go back for me?"

"I'll do it." Damyana kisses the back of Gloria's hand.

"Yes, go back to the Brigade. Find out for me how to kill this God-hater Zimara."

● Get Lost

Next time Rekady brings up the question of where to locate the family, Zimara tells him, "This isn't working out. I don't want what you want. I think we have to stop."

"Stop?"

"I can't keep carrying you."

"You carry me!" Zimara's unhappiness comes as no surprise, but it didn't occur to Rekady that he is the cause.

"You and your demands. 'Let's do this. Let's do that.' I'm sick of it."

"What do you want, then?"

"I want you to clear out."

"It's a mistake, Zee."

"My mistake, anyway."

Rekady chews his lip a moment, eyes downcast, and nods. "OK. I'll say goodbye to Gret and Aloyzi. I hope you give them a better explanation than you're giving me." So he packs a bag and says goodbye to the kids. He makes no promises, but tells them he'll remember all the things they did together. "Call me," he tells Zimara, and hoists the pack on one shoulder and goes through the door. To Gret, watching from the stairway, Zimara's face expresses nothing but determination, a relentlessness that frightens her.

Next day Zimara packs up, too. "Couple of things to do in Kavkaz. Can you handle Aloyzi and Gret for a little while?"

"Not forever," Arasely replies. She is deeply disturbed by Zimara's mood, but Arasely has her own business to attend to. She is trying to reestablish a home for her family.

● Sic Transit Gloria

Commander Gloria boasts online about her miraculous escape from the Jezebels of the Brigade. Hand of God, blah blah. Vengeance is Mine, et cetera. And despite Archbishop Eddie's warnings, she can't resist comparing her own deliverance to the vaporization of that musical martyr Sevik, and Brother Michael's facial misfortune.

When he stops pissing himself, the ravaged archangel asks for a meeting. He tells Gloria he needs someone to take Sevik's place as security chief, someone who can confront these dickless demons on their own terms. Now more than ever the One Trues have to pull together. He promises guns, money, full access to Sevik's databases. Let bygones be bygones.

Only caveat: it's got to be a secret for now. Michael doesn't want the Zimaras to know of Gloria's promotion. They would just redouble their efforts to kill her. So they meet at night off a gravel drive not far from the Untouched Virgin Spiritual Life Center. Gloria brings a couple of the Married to Jesus women.

Brother Michael shoots them both when they get out of the car. Still in the back seat, Gloria fumbles for her gun but Sergeant Major Greb punches her through the open window and drags her out by the hair. Michael walks over to the queen of killer glam and shoots her in the belly. She looks up at him with fear and hate.

"Burn in hell."

"No," he says. "God loves me." He bends down so his face is close to hers. "He doesn't love you, Gloria." He kicks her to death, whistling while he works, some random tune, a cigarette commercial perhaps. He feels better now. It's like an itch he finally got to scratch.

Michael records the result, will send it circuitously to Nagahry. He feels sure the Archbishop will know who it's from.

• It's Not Over

Zimara calls a meeting of the Brigade Council. Only half the group leaders show up.

"We've had some time off. Time to get back in gear." She asks for updates from each unit. The reports are very vague. The prihvadji have had their minds on better things than war. Zimara is frustrated and contentious.

"We've got to plan the next steps."

"It's been barely a couple of months," Katerin protests. "The holy men are still licking their wounds, and their assholes. What's the hurry?"

"Next steps! Zimara, we clobbered them," Tamar says. "What more do we need to do?"

"A setback for them, for sure, but they will regroup. You remember, after they failed at Peshnits, they just changed tactics. Now they are weak. Now is the time to hit them hard," Zimara insists.

Lemane says, "Let the army do it. We have been too long away from our families."

"The government won't strike across the border. Only we can do this."

Emiliye thinks they should leave it to the Kulkhiz generals. "The Crusade has turned out to be a very bad investment for them. They have got to be pretty disappointed. Let them wipe their own assholes."

Zimara shakes her head. "You think Michael Modrek is taking time off?"

Mandalika says, "I don't see how giving our fighters a few weeks more is going to hurt anyone. The Crusade lost telecomm and some of their best officers. It will take time for them to rebuild."

"What I fear is that delay now will prolong the war. We have a narrow window to finish off these criminals. And the longer we wait, the more we'll lose our edge."

"The practical reality is, you called the meeting, and we're missing half the leadership," Mandalika points out. "It won't be any better when you call in the members."

"They are not just tired," Arasely says. "They are looking past the war now. They are hopeful. You did that, Zimara."

Zimara leans back in her chair, shoulders thrown back. "So we all get caught up in a tangle of family commitments."

Exasperated, Arasely responds, "What have we been fighting for? The Brigade is too important for family? Give us some time!"

Zimara looks around. "You're right. We won't get everyone back right now. So give me leave to recruit my own unit. And a budget; I'll need money."

Tamar asks, "And who would you answer to?"

"I'm Senior Councillor. I'll report to the Council, as always. But it looks to me like the rest of you are not interested." She leans forward. "So get out of my way. Let me do what needs to be done."

Arasely shakes her head. "Doesn't feel right, Zee."

Mandalika doesn't think so either. "A special group, outside our structure? We've always done things together."

"Which is it, then? Back me up or get out of the way. I don't care how we do this. We need to get it done. It's urgent. You think I want to keep us at war?"

The prihvadji look at one another. Arasely says, "I think you don't know what you'll do when it's over."

Zimara's mouth hangs open for a moment. "What does that mean?"

"You're a good commander," Arasely tells her.

Fayela says, "The best."

Arasely continues, "And you've gotten comfortable with fighting and with command. Maybe you should ask yourself if you're not a little afraid to give it up."

"I will not— " Zimara sputters. She is so mad she is almost speechless. Arasely waits patiently for an answer.

Zimara has no interest in intentions. Actions are what count.

By that same measure, she better listen to Arasely. Arasely runs the network very effectively in scores of villages. Also she doesn't mind speaking up when other women hesitate. Zimara has learned a lot from her. So Zimara swallows the sarcastic retort on the tip of her tongue and replies instead: "Whatever the answer to that may be, do you think it will change the likelihood that right now Modrek and the Archbishop are planning how to strike back at us?"

Mandalika agrees. "Zee is right. We need to do this. Some of the members won't come back, but since Rudomil a thousand more want to join."

Zimara holds up a hand. "If you want, I'll resign this year. There's a man who takes up too much air. After that . . . ."

Arasely dismisses this impatiently. "Please, no grand gestures. Our argument is not about you, but about what's best for all of us."

The Senior Councillor accepts the rebuke. "Fair enough. Once we make it so the Crusade can't hurt us any longer, we'll see what is the will of the Council. For now: will you help?"

"Yes— next Monday." Arasely looks around, sees the others assent. "Give us the week with our families."

"As you wish. We meet here Monday. And I want to hear from everyone. Call the small group prihvadji. And track down your best fighters. Be sure we can reach them in a hurry."

Sunday Zimara takes her kids fishing. Arasely sends a couple women to stay just in sight, upstream and down.

"Arasely yelled at me yesterday," Zimara says. "And the others. They think I don't leave them enough time for their families." Gret waits. "They are probably right," Zimara says. "I want you to know, both of you, that you are the most important thing in my life."

Aloyzi never hears his mom talk this way, like she's uncertain, like she's made a mistake, like she's afraid. It makes him uncomfortable. He picks another bug out of his box and fixes it squirming to the hook. He doesn't look at her.

"I think we're almost done," his mom continues. "Just a little more, and then we're done. Then we can go anywhere you want, just the three of us, and have a proper house and be happy together. Aloyzi, I'll teach you how to make masks. What do you think?"

The boy lifts one shoulder, without turning around. He'll believe it when he sees it.

"Why does it have to be you?" Gret asks.

"Because I know how to do it. Mandalika and the rest . . . you know I love them, but right now I'm the best person." Zimara thinks a minute. "We have to finish this now. It's so important. None of us are safe while the Crusader leaders still have their armies. I can't rest while you're not safe, and I want to finish it." Zimara wants to hold her daughter tight, but isn't sure that Gret would welcome that. Instead she bobs a quick kiss to the top of Gret's head. "I promise, promise, promise, we're almost done. Then we can be together all the time."

After a while Gret tugs on her line and asks, "Why did you send Rekady away?"

Zimara hesitates. There's a lot to say about Rekady, but right now the short answer will have to do. "I can't be thinking about him now. That will get me killed." Zimara looks sharply at her daughter, who gazes back, and nods once, trying to understand.

• New Partner

When Eddie sees the video, he has to pretend he doesn't know who sent it. This makes the Crusader rank and file lose respect all the more. It's a deliberate slap in the face.

"Probably inevitable," Gloria whispers in his ear. "You knew she didn't belong."

"Still, I liked her," Eddie complains. "He didn't need to do that." He starts blubbering.

"Pull yourself together, man!" retorts the ghost of Gloria.

Brother Michael breaks up Gloria's Married to Jesus entourage, but keeps the office, web site, and Mladenka to answer the comm.

Before Sevik went to heaven, Brother Michael had him track down Gloria's source in the Brigade. Now Brother Michael calls her up.

"I know you were Gloria's great friend, and I just want to say how sorry I am for your loss. She was my friend, too."

"Who is this?" Damyana demands.

"This is Brother Michael. You don't know me, but I worked with Gloria for many years."

"I know who you are." Gloria did not have kind words for him.

"And rest assured, I am determined to call Zimara to account for this vicious crime."

"Zimara?"

"Who else? You know they hated each other."

"Zimara didn't kill her." This possibility has never occurred to Damyana. She has heard nothing like this in Kavkaz. Could be true, though. Since Blago, the Zimaras do not advertise their murders, but Zimara, Mandalika and Arasely have all been busy erasing prominent Crusaders.

"O yes. We have witnesses. She and the big hat, what's her name. They butchered our Gloria like a hog. Cut up bad," he says. When Damyana says nothing, Michael continues. "We are all of us in mourning. They will hold the service at Djemdjad Cathedral. We understand if you can't attend. But do you mind if I call you again? As one friend of Gloria's to another."

"I can't help you on this."

"But Ms. Damyana, you've already helped us. You don't know how often the Commander praised your courage and piety. And she recorded all your calls, so we know how much you contributed. Naturally, we'd like to reward your loyalty."

This is a nasty shock. Wouldn't want that word to get around. Damyana makes a quick decision.

"Would I be working for the Archbishop?"

Brother Michael is so surprised he almost drops the comm. This is his first acquaintance with Damyana's freakish adaptability. "Of course. He is our spiritual leader, and a great man."

"You can only call me through my mom."

"However you want to do it." They exchange more numbers. When Damyana goes off comm, Michael laughs out loud. "Queen of demons, I've got you now!" he crows.

Breaks Damyana's heart to hear about Gloria, but she will manage. Damyana envisioned a cozy life after the war, she and Jesus and the tall Crusader home-making in a little cottage by a pond. Holy family. Strange to say, Gloria's death interrupts the fantasy only a little while; soon it resumes, richer and more vivid than ever. Damyana has trained herself for years not to think about certain things, very big things, making Gloria's death when it comes relatively easy to lock away. The real Gloria was anyway never more than a scaffolding for the invented one, and her timely demise a guarantee that Damyana's version will survive unsullied. As she has done all her life, Damyana imagines a world of sunshine and laughter and being loved.

• Incursion

Turns out the Zimaras need cross no borders to confront the Crusade, because the Crusaders take Semsenkir, not far from Echmash, and half a day west of Kulkhiz. The Brigade has a dozen men and women in the local cell, and recently sent a small contingent to help them expand: Arax from the Meeyadz Council, Rusla and Renata with some medical supplies, and an escort unit. Several have been killed or captured, along with many townspeople.

The initial reports they get indicate a Crusader force of two to three hundred. That's a lot of firepower for such a small place. The Crusaders bring in artillery and construction equipment and start to pour concrete. Then Brother Michael arrives from Hidris. What's going on? One by one comms go silent as the Crusaders search the town. Zimara sends Arasely's unit with some cameras to map and count.

The Brigade commanders figure the Crusaders are preparing a base to attack Echmash again and retake the Zalman Valley. First thing to do is to establish a cordon around the place, make sure the Crusaders can't break out unseen. The Council sends word through the network: We need your help. Combat units start arriving in Kavkaz from around the country.

Four weeks after the attack on Semsenkir, Kut forwards an online address. Brother Michael has posted another video.

• Challenge

The Crusader commander walks to the camera and adjusts it so it will take in the whole view. With his right nostril gone you can see up his nose. They have grafted a piece from the back of his shoulder to close the gap over his teeth but it's no more than a flap; must be a bitch when he tries to whistle. He pulls back so you can see the frosty field and the town walls and bell tower in the background. About sixty men and women kneel in a semicircle in the snow, hands tied behind their backs. A dozen bodies sprawl in front: Zimaras and villagers shot in the attack. It's sunny and cold. A slight breeze ruffles the women's scarves and hair. Off-camera, a muffled sobbing. Sergeant Major Greb walks along the line of captives, snapping a prod against his calf; he wants no slouches for this performance.

Michael looms into view again. "All these people? We charge them with harboring heretics. With apostasy. There is one true religion, and they have betrayed it." He pauses to flick away a trickle of drool from the side of his mouth. "Hear me! We are going to sort out the believers from the blasphemers. You listening, Zimara? Zimaaaaar-a!" he sings. "I figure it will take four or five days to clear out this lot. Gonna send some sinners to hell!"

Michael steps back. Mikchr and another soldier bring two women forward. (It's Sergeant Mikchr now; he dodged bullets so successfully at the Hidris fiasco, how could they not promote him? Besides, just now the Crusade is a little short on noncomms.) The cameraman zooms in on Rusla and Renata, the Brigade's medical team. They have been badly beaten.

"Sisters, are you?" Michael says. They stare at him numbly. "Sure, sisters," he agrees with himself. He nods to the new sergeant, who frees Renata's hands with his knife. Mikchr takes out his sidearm, drops the clip, shows her the single bullet, snaps it back in, and hands it to her.

"Imbecile!" Michael snatches the gun. "The knife, man." So Mikchr gives Renata the knife instead. It's heavy. It has a long blade. She holds it in both hands in front of her, dangling loosely.

"So here's what," Michael explains. "You kill your sister, or I kill you. Understand?" He grabs Rusla by the hair. "You don't want me to hurt your sister, do you? Go on, tell her to kill you," he laughs, flapping his non-lip like a toilet stopper.

Rusla shrugs. "Not my sister," she mumbles, and smiles at her lover.

God's warrior snaps her head back and Rusla stumbles and falls to her knees. "You or her," he tells Renata. The camera lingers a moment on the dagger in Renata's hands.

Renata smiles, too, and drops to her knees by Rusla. Renata points to the ground and Rusla lies down on her side in the snow. She puts her hands under her cheek. "Close your eyes, sweetie," Renata directs, and without waiting stabs her in the eye. Rusla's body convulses. Renata withdraws the blade. It's kind of messy. Renata has no wish to serve as bait to draw Zimara. She looks into the camera and plunges the knife into her own throat, and tugs, and topples over. Michael jumps back to avoid the spray.

"How about that," says Greb.

"It's a set up," says Kut from Saray.

"Yes," Zimara agrees. She's in her office in Kavkaz, watching again on the big screen with her Council.

"He's desperate. The Crusade is falling apart. Michael knows the only chance he has now is to dump your body on Vraymn's doorstep."

"That may be. Still, we can't let him kill all these people." Zimara knew it would come to this—more terror, more beloved dead. But now she has him. She is sure of it. "You'll be the last," she promises the dead women.

• Gatherings

The Zimaras don't have much time, and they know they have to get this right. Takes them four days to develop the rescue plan and reposition their people around Semsenkir. Each group rehearses its part in minute detail, but only a few on Council know the overall strategy.

To goad the Brigade, Brother Michael kills one captive a day and broadcasts the video. Heaven's beloved favors having children shoot their parents. He finds it a long overdue complement to Abraham's fatherly devotion, and sweet consolation for the missed opportunities of his own boyhood.

The parents know what to do. The kids do, too. After one mom says, "It's OK, Halise, see you in heaven," the Crusaders stuff rags in their victims' mouths. So when it's his turn all Shurik's dad can do is kneel and nod his head, but the boy hesitates.

Michael wears a loose tunic of white linen. It glows in the sunshine. He smacks dad in the mouth with his pistol, knocking him to the ground, and upends on him a can of petrol. Michael gestures to Greb, who passes the cigarette he has been smoking. Grinning, Michael waves the cigarette at the boy. Shurik empties the pistol into his father, who squirms a bit with the impact. Greb pries away the weapon.

Michael drops the butt onto the body and watches it burst into flame. Shurik's dad roasts merrily. "Depart from Me," Michael quotes the Good Book, watching Shurik all the while, "and damn you into everlasting fire." Michael walks over and claps the boy on the shoulder. "What's your name, boy?"

"Shurik." The kid won't look at him. Shurik's nostrils flare, sucking in the smoke of his father's holocaust.

Michael scans the crowd. "Our Book tells us, the children shall rise against their parents and put them to death," he calls out. "Behold!" Michael takes his crucifix and hangs it around the boy's neck. "You are one of us now, Shurik. Praise God," he directs.

"Praise God!" Shurik shouts. He raises his fists to the sky. "Praise God Praise God Praise God!" Michael enfolds the boy in his arms like a squirming bony hatchling. Shurik tries to push away, flailing, but Brother Michael presses the boy's face to his chest, smothering Shurik's cries. "Hush now." When the boy quiets Brother Michael brushes back the bangs from Shurik's forehead. "It's OK, lad. It's OK to cry. Don't be ashamed. You're in the Lord's hands now." Michael kisses him on the forehead and

speaks softly in his ear. "If these women had not rebelled, your dad would still be alive. You know that, don't you?"

Shurik won't look at him. Michael is used to that. The boy will come around. Another squeeze and he lets the boy go. Greb leads him away. Warms Michael's heart to be able to give these young folks a chance in life he never had himself.

Many murders, but the Brigade knows the Crusade won't slaughter the whole town, not yet. Then Michael would have no bait for Zimara and nothing to keep NATO warplanes from flattening the place. To reinforce the threat, Zimara has Halevy arrange daily overflights, which have the added advantage of providing good images of Semsenkir and the surrounding area.

Since Rudomil, Halevy has become a captain, and the Army's de facto liaison with the Brigade. He calls from Kut's office. "The government can get armor up there, but you'll have to wait a week."

Kut says, "The Crusaders don't want to tangle with the Army. It's Zimara they want. They see military, they'll just burn the town and take off across the border."

The Brigade commanders agree. "Bring your people," Mandalika tells the Captain. "But we can't wait a week. If we fail, then you go play."

There is something the Army can help with in the meantime. Once Arasely starts poking around Semsenkir, she realizes the comm is terrible. There are no relay towers that side of the mountains. This puts the Brigade at a big disadvantage. The Crusaders hold the center— the town and the outskirts. Brigade groups are scattered round about, separated by ridges and the Semsen River— too far for the radios they have. The Brigade will have to be very careful that Brother Michael doesn't engage their groups one by one, and smash each in turn. In this battle even more than most, timing and coordination will be crucial. So the Army distributes comms programmed to their satellite and loaded with cryptware; wants them back after the battle; each recipient has to sign a receipt. Yeah, right.

Another welcome contribution: drone-killer rockets. The Crusaders have a handful of ancient UAVs for surveillance. Once the Zimaras shoot down a few, the Crusaders have to use their machines more sparingly; in consequence, they may go hours between battlefield overviews. This, too, will be important to the Brigade's battle plan.

The Brigade gets further help from an unexpected quarter: Commander Gloria's vengeful family show up in force, with plenty of weaponry they are willing to share. How did they get their hands on splatterguns? Mandalika wonders, but would never be so rude as to ask aloud. She takes care to position the Dvelkoi far from Bryony's gang, deadly rivals, who have also come to join the fun. After the disaster at Hidris Michael raised taxes again, to make up for his losses, and the smuggling gangs are tired of spoon-feeding these greedy god spouters. And Zimara has promised to share the haul of armament she expects to pry from the hands of cold dead Dildos.

Of course the Dvelkoi won't divulge their role in targetting the health workers. But Larissa sends Gloria's bastard Danilo to contact Damyana. They meet at a practice range in Kavkaz, while his cousins instruct the Zimaras in the finer points of splatterguns. Danilo delivers Larissa's letter saying it was Brother Michael who killed Gloria. Damyana reads it a couple times. The Nderadj writes in a curious ornate hand.

"Michael told me it was Zimara," Damyana says. "I'll kill that bastard," she promises. Danilo himself seems not to care one way or another. For Damyana, the idea of Gloria is so strong in her mind —not so much memories as radiant images and sensations— she can scarcely believe her great friend is dead.

It scarcely matters. It's too late to undo her deal with Brother Michael. And this bitterness she has felt for months toward Zimara, she can't undo that so easily either. All these people have failed her. They killed Gloria. What does Damyana care if they kill each other?

It's going to be difficult to get to the captives in time. The Semsen River and marsh protect Semsenkir on the north and west, just upstream from where it joins the Zalman. The Crusaders have fortified both sides of the bridge, but have entrenched the bulk of their forces in ditches and bunkers well to the south of town, and on a steep wooded ridge to the southeast. Their positions there form a funnel like the mouth of a meatgrinder. The Brigade has a few tanks and APCs but it wouldn't make sense to send them in until they can clear Crusaders from the ridge.

"Guidance can't get a fix on them," Halevy reports from Saray. "Most likely several MRAT teams." This is Michael's new tactic to counter air strikes: instead of digging big guns in place, he has scattered small, highly mobile units with midrange antitank rockets along two kilometers of ridge, popping from bunker to bunker amid a litter of electronic chaff. The warplanes just can't see them.

Brigade infantry will have to sweep the ridge before sending tanks against the Crusader line, and that will take too long. Michael will have plenty of time to murder his captives and escape unscathed into Kulkhiz. Clearly his intent is to force the Brigade into a frontal assault and then chop it up once and for all. On their side, the Zimaras aim to snatch the hostages and get away with minimum casualties. They need a back way in.

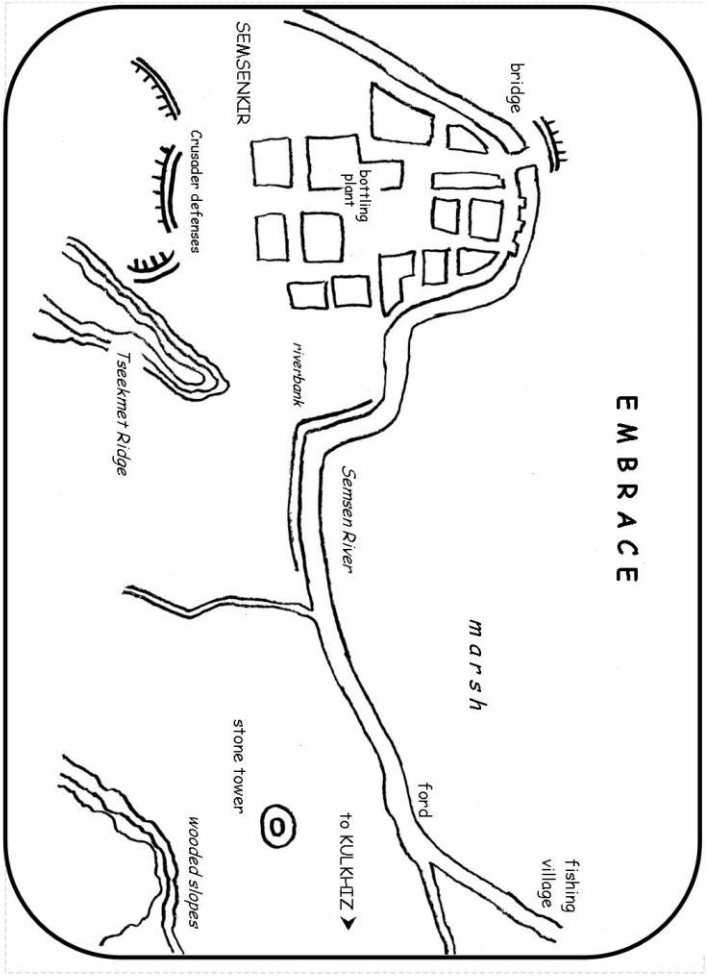
"I know a way," Damyana says. She and her mom lived there for years. "East of town there's a place you can ford the Semsen. Since they built the bridge they don't use it, but you can still get across. It's deeper this time of year; you'd need a line." East side, that's good; they can get between the Crusaders and Kulkhiz.

When they comm Arasely to check it out, she confirms what Damyana remembers. "There's a long strip of bottomland from the ford to Semsenkir. That way we bypass their build-up at the bridge. Not a lot of cover, so we better cross at night. Take maybe an hour to make our way to town. They'll still be snoozing." She adds that there's an old stone tower close to the ford.

"That's right," Damyana says. "The old clans, they built it to control the crossing."

"Pretty important detail, Damyana," Mandalika comments. "Anything else you'd care to share?" She swipes through the map on her screen. "I see it."

"No one there now," Arasely says. "We can take it to cover our approach." So that's the plan.



• Reborn

Close to three hundred of the townspeople have so far survived the Crusader occupation, including a secret handful of Brigade members. Scores have been injured, recipients of the Crusaders' casual or calculated cruelty in the weeks since the attack. Some can barely walk, and hang on the shoulders of husbands or wives. Now the Crusaders herd them all into the Clear Sparkling bottling plant, a tangle of assembly lines, elevated metal tanks and frames for machines never installed.

There are no bottles, no power and no water —Clear Sparkling awaits the Crusader victory— but it's a good place to hold lots of hostages with a minimal force of guards. Starts to stink up quickly, though. So God's soldiers put the women to work digging latrines in the gravel lot behind the plant. The boys squat cradling their weapons, leering and jeering at the women. They tug at their crotches and making kissing sounds. New recruit Shurik doesn't like it. This is no way for godly men to act. They pass around a joint but Shurik shakes his head.

"What's the matter?" an older boy asks. "Too good for us?" Shurik won't look up. He just hugs his gun tighter, his face burning. He knows several of the women digging there in front of them. One is his dad's sister, Sandriya. Shurik doesn't know she's a Zimara.

Later on the Lieutenant comes by. "How you doing, boy?" When Shurik won't look up Byedny calls over to the others. "How's he doing?" They just shrug; coddling new kids is not their job.

“Never mind them, Shurik. You just do what I tell you.” Byedny lingers for a moment, waiting for Shurik to speak, but the boy stares out into the night. The Lieutenant shrugs and walks away.

Shurik doesn’t need sympathy. He’s got Jesus. All these others, with their drugs and their jokes— he knows he is stronger than they. Tougher. And he sees that they are afraid. They boast about how they’re going to rape and murder the Zimaras, but they think maybe the women will kill them instead. They wonder how it will feel.

Shurik thinks he was afraid once, but he can’t recall the feeling. Seems like a million years ago. Now he does not fear. In His infinite love and mercy God has extended His mighty hand over Shurik’s life. The boy does not need the others’ paltry comforts, their desperate distractions. He bathes in cold and hunger as in a mountain stream. He feels clean, and clad in shining raiment. Shurik is a man set apart, reborn. He is eager. His mind is set on going home— very soon, now.

• Midnight Crossing

It’s a crackling cold night. A local couple walks the Zimaras on a frozen path through the marsh. A light snow has dusted the grass and branches. They get to the river close to midnight and crouch behind the treeline, peering into the fog until they hear the thrum of the Crusader patrol boat. It mutters by slowly, the twin cylinders of its lights compressed by the mist into swirling disks. Once the boat passes, heading downstream toward Semsenkir, Esma and Sanuyala shed their packs and pile a coil of nylon cord onto a small raft. They push it into the water and step into the stream, gasping. Halfway across they lose their footing and have to swim. The watchers lose sight of them, but in a few minutes the cord tightens and rises from the water.

“Set,” Esma transmits. The fighters walk into the river one by one, pulling the inflatables with their gear wrapped in Watertite. Midway the shorter women especially have to hold tight to the cord against the pull of the stream. On the far bank they pull weapons and dry clothing from the rafts. They draw in the line while Emiliye comms Mandalika on the other side of town.

“The woods are swarming,” Mandalika reports. “It’s going to be a fight.” She has a hundred fighters climbing Tseekmet Ridge.

“Just keep them busy,” Emiliye says. “Everything good, my dear.” This is Emiliye’s group. As Senior Councillor, Zimara hasn’t had her own group for months. Now she serves as Emiliye’s Second. She’s also Second to Mandalika as Fight Chief, in overall charge of the battle. Zimara will pick up if either gets hurt.

When they hear distant gunfire, she and Emiliye lead sixty three men and women up over the riverbank. Taissa, Sanuyala and Damyana race through the fog toward the black hulk of the old stone tower, while the others turn west along a line of trees. Soon they hear closer sounds of battle; must be Lemane’s unit, attacking Crusader positions at the bridge in Semsenkir. They shiver as they pick their way across hedgerows and stubbled fields, stumbling sometimes over unseen clots of roots, or cracking the surface of iced-over puddles. They can see far away a few lights through the trees; that’s Semsenkir. Arasely has mapped Crusader movements over the past week, so the attackers won’t walk through mines. Two of the women carry between them long coils of a wide-area signal jammer, in case the Crusaders have strewn sensors in their path. Halevy said this device is the best; Zimara hopes he’s right. Stars sparkle between smudges of cloud. The gush of the river drowns out the rustle and clicks of their packs and weapons, and the crackle of ice.

• Uneasy

At the bottling plant captive families hear the gunfire and shift restlessly on the stone floor. The Crusader boys stiffen, too. Brother Michael left barely a dozen men with Lieutenant Byedny. They've got light duty, after all; once they have lured the Zimaras into battle, their only job is to dispose of the hostages. The captain has stationed men in every corner of the main floor, and on the catwalk above. Shurik stands guard by a second-floor window. He can see flashes above Tseekmet Ridge.

The boys are sure the Brigade will never break through Michael's defenses. But what if they do? Byedny makes the rounds, followed by a recruit lugging a canvass bag on either shoulder. He drops three or four extra weapons at each man's side. When he gets to Shurik, all he has left are two ancient machine pistols and several clips in a beat up leather bag. The Lieutenant shows him how to work the guns. "When I give the signal, you just let loose. Empty every clip, right? Then get out of here. We'll meet up in the courtyard. We'll be back in Kulkhiz this time tomorrow."

The Zimaras among the captives have a plan, too. They are going to rush the Crusaders posted in the corners of the main floor, while others grab a forklift and break through the door to the loading dock. They hope to get most of the townsfolk out before the Crusaders kill them all. But they need help.

• Call for Help

With light from their wristlamps Damyana's group can see that the floor of the tower is littered with trash from fieldhands and picnickers. They take the stairway along the wall and climb to the chamber at the top, where wide narrow openings overlook fields on every side. They have a good view of the river to the north, and the riverbank where it curves to the northwest. Taissa and Sanuyala kneel to unpack their gear. They are going to assemble a machinegun. Damyana leaves a grenade on the floor and goes down the stairs, switches on the comm and puts her hands over her ears. After the explosion, she yells into her comm, "Zimara, help us! It's Brother Michael. Zee, we need help!" She pockets the comm and returns upstairs.

Damyana sees a torn bundle stirring under a window. Trembling, Taissa raises her weapon with one shredded limb.

"Taissa, it's me, Damyana." Taissa lowers the gun and Damyana shoots her.

Damyana hears gunfire by the river now, and boots pounding up the tower steps. Six Crusaders burst in, followed by Greb and Brother Michael. Damyana knows Michael by the mangled nose and mouth. A radio sputters by Sanuyala's side, but it's messed up, kaput. The soldiers overturn the dead women and search them. Four men wrestle a 25mm cannon up the stairway.

"So you are Damyana," Michael says. "Good job! Now you may go."

Damyana hesitates, confused. Greb's men start to set up the cannon, and the machine gun Damyana's group brought. Something else, too: a massive battery-operated sound system, the kind small towns use for futbol games. They hang the speaker on a frame depending from one of the firing slits.

"I did what I promised," Damyana says. "Let me stay."

"But you're not done. You promised me Zimara. Go back and get her."

"She'll come for me here. I know it."

"Did you tell her I'm here?"

"Like you asked."

"Then I don't need you here." He pulls a shiny metal cube from his pocket. "You've seen these before. You push this little knob to activate it. Get this onto that Satan-sucking Jezebel. Then we can see her. She does fellate the devil, doesn't she?" He shoves the tracker in Damyana's jacket pocket, mashing her breast.

"You said— "

"O, you want to be paid. Sure. Finish the job! Then we pay you." He cocks his head, listening to the fight by the river.

"I'm not doing this for money."

"Of course. You do it for Jesus." She stands there stolidly, glaring. Greb lights a cigarette and tosses the match onto Sanuyala's face. It lands just under her left eye and burns out with a little wisp. Michael continues, "Bring me Zimara. Get her in front of my guns. You can do it. Then Jesus will clap you to his bosom. You will rest forever in Paradise."

Damyana thinks of Gloria's smile, her touch. "If I go back now, you'll kill me with the others."

Michael smirks at the Sergeant Major. "So worried about your shitty little life. Jesus gave his life for you. And you begrudge Him this last service? Bring us that scar-face whore, then all this is over."

Damyana knows better.

Michael raises his handgun and swings at her, gashing her over the eye. Damyana falls to her knees, then stands up again, hand to her forehead.

"Don't want them to think you're a snitch, do you? Go!" he commands.

"You have no respect for women!" she spits.

Michael laughs. "I love women. I kill dykes." He aims the gun at her head. "Run, little dyke! Take off!"

"I'm not a — I'm not a —-" She can't say the word. Grinding her teeth, Damyana peels off her backpack, comm and weapons belt, and drops them by Taissa's body. She wobbles down the steps and out the high portal. She can tell where the Zimaras are by the muzzle flashes and explosions. To the west the fields teem with moving forms. She veers the other way, toward the ford, but the men in the tower fire over her right shoulder. They are not going to let her leave the battlefield.

As she drops over the riverbank Damyana hears a sudden screeching from the tower, and then the audio kicks in. She has heard these tunes before. *Blood of the Captives. Smoke of Their Torment Forever. Strip You and Stab You*— the latest hits from the Holy Land**,** interrupted now by the dulcet tones of God's own DJ, our newest archangel, Brother Michael.

"Zimaaaaaar-ah," he croons. "Come to me, Zimara. Let me kiss you." Of course, with only half a lip, he can't pronounce the m's. Sounds like baby babble from something locked in a basement by shamed and fearful parents.

• Improvise

Emiliye's group has just made it back to the river when Mandalika calls. Zimara crouches under the bank as bullets whip overhead.

"Stumble into a patrol?" Mandalika asks.

Zimara holds a hand over the earpiece to hear better. "No patrol," she says. "A company at least. Hard to tell how many. A lot. They were waiting for us."

"They knew you were coming." The Crusaders pour fire at the river. Mortar shells land in the stream or explode just above it, but the Crusaders don't know exactly where the Zimaras are. So far the shells go off too far away to do much damage.

"We can sort that out later," Zimara says. "We've got four dead or unresponsive, and four barely mobile. I'm concerned we can't get into town. They'll murder everyone."

"Stay by the river. They can't see you, yeah? Follow the river bank into Semsenkir."

"Tried that. There's a bend a little west of here, though, and when we got there we started taking fire. They've taken the stone tower, and they can see into the curve."

"Shit."

"Yes."

"Means you can't back off across the ford, either. How did they get into the tower?"

Emiliye joins in from her position at the other end of the line. She has just seen Damyana stagger back into the group. "Manda, it's Michael Modrek. Damyana's group, they walked into an ambush. She thinks Taissa and Sanuyala are dead."

"Modrek for sure?"

Emiliye pauses to confer by comm. "Right. Damyana saw him at the tower, and Greb."

"Good!" Mandalika declares. "Fuck them up for me!"

Zimara has to laugh. "Care to join us?"

"You start without us. May be a little late. Save us some for dessert." Mandalika adds something, but they can't make it out. The comm scrapes for long minutes.

While they wait, Zimara contacts Lemane north of the bridge. "We've run into it."

"We can hear."

"May not get to town any time soon. What about your group? Any chance of getting across the bridge?"

"Hadn't planned on it. Our job was to make a lot of noise while you and Em inserted. If you want, we could make another run at them. Might be able to get into one of their positions. Don't know if we'd have enough left to take the second." Lemane has about forty fighters, fewer than Emiliye's group.

Emiliye calls to Zimara and the women to her left. They raise heads and shoulders above the riverbank and blast away at silhouettes against the stars, then quickly shift position a few meters upstream.

Mandalika comes back on comm. "Sorry, distracted. What is that damn noise?"

She's hearing a snatch of Brother Michael's sound track, *Vengeance Upon Her*.

"Seems like Michael has a thing for our Zimara," Emiliye explains.

"What will you do with his thing, Zee?" Mandalika inquires.

"Your people all right?" Zimara asks.

"No word from Daneetsa," Mandalika says. "Katerin's group made it to the top of the ridge, though, and Jaafar is not far behind."

"Now the Dildos have to shoot uphill."

"And they can't support each other. We can roll up their rocket units one by one. Still got a long way to go."

"What do you think? A couple hours?" Emiliye asks.

"Probably."

"That's a long time for us," Emiliye says. "Pressed pretty hard here."

Lemane says, "Mandalika, we were talking about having my group take the bridge."

"Made any headway?"

"Not so's you'd notice. They are dug in pretty good."

"Don't move just yet. Let's see what we can do to get Emiliye's group out of there."

Zimara objects. "We're OK. We should think about how to get a force into town."

"You are not OK and we reach for what we can reach. Let me talk to Filipa."

What the Crusaders don't know is that Mandalika always keeps a reserve. For this battle, she has assembled another sixty men and women at a fishing hamlet upstream, with as many of the shallow draft marsh boats as they could commandeer, along with local pilots. Filipa is in charge, with Rekady as Second. These are mostly new recruits. The intent was that, once Emiliye's group freed the captives, the little fleet would speed to Semsenkir and board everyone before the main force of Crusaders could fight their way back into town. Now they have to improvise.

"New plan," Mandalika announces when she comes back on-link. "We're going to send you the boats," she tells Emiliye and Zimara. "Lemane can leave a small group at the bridge, and bring the rest along the river until she's across from your position. They'll cover while Filipa's boats pick you up and

take you into town. The others will keep the bridge under fire while you and Filipa's group go in for the captives. Tell me what you think."

Zimara shakes her head. "Won't work. Take too long to maneuver the boats here and for all of us to get on board. The Dildos will be firing the whole time. We'd lose the boats."

"I have to agree," Emiliye says. "Filipa can get to us, but those little boats— fully loaded, they'll be just too slow launching again. We'd be cut to pieces."

"Send them direct to town," Zimara says. "Just pass us by, full throttle. They don't need us, they can recover our people by themselves. Can't be many Crusaders left in town. They are on the ridge or at the bridge or right here in front of us, raining fire."

Rekady has been listening. "We'll come under fire whether we hurry on past or stop to get you."

"We'll make sure they're busy," Zimara says. "They can't see the river from the fields. The threat is the tower by the ford. We'll take care of it."

Mandalika considers for a minute. "Filipa? What about that? You'll have to fight your way in."

Filipa waits with her group at the edge of the marsh upstream, screened by high grasses. She looks at the men and women squatting in the string of boats, cradling all sorts of hardware. The women nearest listen closely.

"We can do it, Manda."

"We're not sure how many Crusaders are left in town."

Filipa grins at her fighters. "Let us find out."

"Lemane?"

"I hear you."

"So you stay where you are. Keep the boys at the bridge from moving back into town when Filipa gets there."

"Got it."

"Emiliye and Zimara. If we do this, you've got to get close to that tower. I'm not going to send Filipa until you're ready and we're ready on this side. So tell us now: Can you hold?"

"We'll hold," Emiliye promises. "Kind of low on ammunition," she adds.

"Right. Filipa, can you get one boat to Emiliye? Rockets. Splatters. They need this soonest."

"Rekady says he can do it. Best with two boats, though. We load them too heavy, we won't get past the ford."

"That's OK," Emiliye says. "We don't want them to see you from the tower anyway. One boat. Put in just east of the ford. I'll send a team to meet you. As much sparkle as you can spare."

"Got it."

"I forbid it," Zimara says. "Filipa will need everyone for the fight in town."

"I don't anwer to you," Rekady retorts. "Remember? You told me so yourself. We need you at the river to cover us. You need ammunition to do that."

Mandalika splits the difference. One of the local pilots will bring the ammunition boat. After Emiliye's group has resupplied, Rekady will go to Semsenkir with Filipa's fighters. Mandalika doesn't need a pair of ex-lovers spurring each other on to destruction.

"And Emiliye, get some shooters up into the fields," she says. "Get behind the Dildos if you can, disrupt their line."

"We can do that."

"Second, they are going to rush you, and they have to do it before it gets light. So you need to build barriers, too. Trash, rocks, branches, whatever you can scrounge."

"Already underway," Emiliye replies.

"Build them into the river."

"OK. Tell us why."

"When they come at you, I want you to maintain fireflow like we practiced. That should thin them out good. Then fall back fast. You're going to set up so you can fire along the beach. Parallel to the

river, got it? Just don't shoot each other. They won't know where you are. Let them charge over the bank and slice them up as they fall. Don't panic. Stick to your positions. They'll come fast, but your bullets are faster."

● Crossfire

"She's right," Emiliye says. "We need to break up their line."

Zimara nods. "What do you think? Can we spare seven or eight?"

Emiliye shakes her head. "Four. I hate to ask you do to this, Zee."

Zimara shrugs. "The part I like, the Crusader boys, they're thick as ticks in the weeds. We get a firefight going, they'll take the casualties."

"Don't linger. Wreak havoc and get out."

Damyana has been listening. Now she offers to go with Zimara. If somehow she can make a ruckus, the Crusaders will spot Zimara. Then Damyana's battle will be over. Or maybe she'll save Zimara and avenge Gloria and the Brigade will triumph and they'll all love each other forever. Damyana knows she has to do something to resolve this unbearable tension.

Zimara looks curiously at the ugly slash on Damyana's forehead. "What have you done, Damyana?"

"What do you mean?" Damyana is shocked. She tightens her grip on the gun in her hand.

Zimara studies Damyana a moment longer, and says,"I'm sorry, Damyana, you're hurt. I'm afraid you'd slow us down."

Damyana realizes now she has to stick with her first intention. Zimara has to go. Really, Damyana needs both of them, bandit and archangel, gone from this planet. Erased, forgotten. How could that come to pass? Damyana is smart. Zimara taught her that. Damyana thinks hard how to delete these unpleasant reminders.

Zimara takes Siranoozh and Cresida and Esma. There's a little creek trickling into the river not far away. They follow it on their bellies to get in the midst of the Crusaders. The freezing water is only a few inches deep, but soaks them to the skin. Zimara has them all turn around, heads toward the river, so if they're spotted they will look like Crusaders. This is a little complicated in the shallow space. They slither backwards until Zimara halts. "Cresida, fifty meters that way. I'll go east. You two, further upstream. Low, low. Ten minutes, start mayhem. Twenty minutes, you get back here fast. Right?" She has to repeat herself to be heard above the chatter of the guns all around.

Zimara takes her time to crawl through the underbrush. She stops twice, when small groups of Crusaders scuttle by. She can see them when they raise their heads and shoulders against the sky. They run a few meters and crouch, to avoid fire from Emiliye's group by the river. Odd: some of these men carry those Rudomil souvenir swords on their backs. It's got to be very cumbersome. Swords? Of course! She realizes: they expect the Brigade to surrender, and the boys won't deny themselves the pleasure of killing women one by one, by hand. Zimara doesn't know Brother Michael has also offered a thousand riyal to the Crusader who brings him her head.

Zimara maneuvers behind two men, pokes her weapon through the grass and shoots them both. The second tries to rise and she shoots him again. If anyone notices, it looks like he got hit from the river. She moves again, spots a third man and shoots him in the back. The fourth she hits in the ass, and he rolls to one side and fires to his left, toppling another Crusader several meters away. That man's mates blaze away across the field. Soon there's a spreading ripple of lateral fire. The Crusaders think they've stumbled upon an army of Zimaras diabolically hidden in their midst.

Zimara makes her way back to the creek. Cresida is overdue. "You go," she tells the other two. "I'll wait."

Esma corrects her. "They'll need you at the river, Senior Councillor. We can wait for Cresida."

Esma is right. Zimara says, “OK. Ten minutes, no more. You understand Cresida is probably dead.”

“I understand.”

Siranoozh and Esma make it back a while later. Cresida does not.

At the stone tower, Brother Michael is cursing into the comm at his captains. “Get to the river. What’s the problem? Finish it!”

“They tried to infiltrate our lines,” Vokno protests. “Forty or fifty. We have killed scores.”

“Not enough!”

• Incorruptible

While he waits for word from Michael, Byedny at the bottling plant has captive women bring tea and candy bars to each of the guards. Shurik’s aunt Sandriya is one of them. When she gets to her nephew, she says, “Shurik, you can help us. Let me take one of the guns.” She sets her basket down, and pretends to reach into it, while extending a hand to the satchel. Angrily he jerks it away. Sandriya straightens up. “No one will see. Help us, Shurik.”

“Get away from me!” he growls.

“Shurik, I know you’re scared, but we are counting on you.” She points to the far wall. “Look. If they start shooting, we are going to go through that door. You’re in perfect position to cover us. You know us, Shurik. Protect us. And then come join us.”

The boy raises a fist as if to strike her. Sandrya looks at him with pity and does not flinch. He drops his hand and turns away. Sandriya pulls out a handful of candies and two cans of Clear Sparkling, and sets them by his feet.

“Food, bitch!” another Crusader yells. Sandriya leaves her nephew, and tries to mask her grief.

• Embrace

A dozen women make their way back from the ammunition boat, hobbling along with firearms, bullets, rockets. The rest of Emiliye’s group have been scrounging the river for rocks and floating debris, and piling them against the fallen tree trunks they find at either end of their stretch of shore. The makeshift barriers extend a little way into the water, perpendicular to the shore but not quite parallel to each other, because of the curving course of the river. The Zimaras have time to build a third barrier midway between the others when they get the word from the spotters: the Crusaders are on their way.

It’s Vokno’s company. The attackers expect to crash into a thin line of women and sweep them into the river. Instead they spill over the riverbank and into a withering crossfire. The Zimaras can jump from one side of their barriers to the other, depending on where the Crusaders come over the edge. They slaughter Vokno’s men as they try to regain their footing and figure out which way to direct their fire. Meanwhile, their mates continue to charge across the field, and fall on them from above. Some get loose from the tangle and plunge into the water, where they make slow and stumbling targets. A few try to scramble back up the bank but it’s too steep and sandy.

A handful of Crusaders come over the bank just above the middle barrier, almost on top of the women. Then it’s club and choke and stab in the freezing water. Damyana fights like a cornered rat. They all do. The Zimaras here outnumber the Crusaders and kill them, losing several people themselves. Torn bodies twirl and drift into the main current of the river.

The first wave of attackers melts away. There’s a lull, then a few uncertain shots from Crusaders in the fields above, seeking targets but finding none. The Zimaras police the beach, tending to wounded

Crusaders. They use knives to save ammunition, and stack the bodies on their barricades. Reeking clouds hang over the river. From the tower a tinny tune of triumph, Moses' reward for his brave conquistadors: *The Young Girls Keep Alive for Yourselves.* Brother Michael assumes his heroes are busy raping and strangling the surrendered women, but after a while he gets annoyed. "Vokno. Vokno!" he comms. He is about to send a messenger when one of Captain Toradzik's officers arrives at the tower.

"You're not Vokno's. Where is he?"

Lieutenant Slatk shuffles his feet. "We're not sure, Brother. He went over the riverbank with his men."

"I told him to cut off her head!" Michael insists, as if Slatk might have Zimara's head in his pocket. The warlord plans to parade his prize back to Kulkhiz and drop it in the Admiral's flower-girdled swimming pool.

"The captain hasn't come back. The men . . . they didn't come back."

God's general racks a tight smile. "Do you think to betray me, brother? Is that what you're doing?"

The officer stands silent, face reddening.

"'And Moses said, 'Have you let the women live? Behold, Israel betrays the Lord!'" Michael recites. "Is that what you're doing?"

"No, Brother. I can only tell you what I know."

"Let me tell you what I know. Our Almighty Father is listening to us right now. He hears these cowardly words from your mouth. He hears that His ever victorious armies suddenly hold back, fearful of some women. That you wear His Cross but you fail Him. Is that what you want Almighty God to hear?"

"I don't want that."

"Then you go back to Toradzik. You tell him I want him at the river." Michael's voice is rising. "Everyone! All of you! Smash them! Be the fist of God!" He tears at his pockets for a comm. "Think you can do that?"

"We can do it, Brother."

"Then why are you standing here?"

As he lopes down the stairs two steps at a time Slatk hears Michael tearing into Toradzik over the comm. Better Zimara's meat-grinder, he thinks. Well, better for the captain, maybe.

• Stone Tower

Emiliye has her fighters start fires along the shoreline, so that they won't freeze in their wet clothes and boots. These give away their position, but it can't be helped.

The group leader squats next to Zimara, who is loading a pack with rockets. "Let me take this one. Why should you have all the fun? You take care of my group."

Zimara smiles but continues working. "Got a date with an archangel. How could a girl resist?"

"We're going to need you on Council. After all this, we'll need you more than ever."

Zimara stops and looks up. "You know, I don't think you will. Maybe you did, but you don't any more. Really, Emiliye, I'm happy."

There are more than enough volunteers to go with Zimara. She chooses ten. Lalekshany wants to join but Zimara tells her she's too young.

The women gear up. They touch fingers and forearms.

"Wait," Damyana says.

"Damyana . . . ."

"No. Let me show you something. The splatters have a targetting system, no?"

"They do, but we have no way to get a drawfire into the tower."

"But I did already. I left my comm there, live. Look, you can key into it." She leans over Zimara and shows her how to input the identifier into the guidance system. "It will look for my comm. Your splatters will run up Michael's ass." The women listening nod and grin. Unseen, Damyana drops Michael's tracker into the pocket of Zimara's jacket.

Zimara nods thoughtfully. She looks up at Damyana, ever so helpful. "OK," Zimara says. "Gret and Aloyzi. Keep them safe. Can you do that?"

Damyana doesn't like this look. "Of course," she says.

The splatters are thermobaric explosives designed for use against tanks and fortifications. They don't have to penetrate to kill. They splash fire against stone and metal, turning bunkers into ovens and sucking out the air. They burn like napalm but hotter. The drawback is their very short range. And they're heavy. The women will have to sneak close to the tower, unseen.

They jog back to the ford, which is the nearest point on the river to Michael's position. Half stay with Yelisavet by the river as backup while Zimara and the rest work their way toward the tower. They take four splatterguns, leaving two with the women at the ford.

They insert well to the east of the main Crusader force, but move slowly to avoid being seen from the tower. They spread out in the dark just below the Crusader guns. A murmur from the south grows into a roar: that's Mandalika engaging with all her forces. Makes the boys in the tower nervous, but Brother Michael waves his hand.

"Doesn't matter. Look." And there it is on the screen, the flash of the locator he gave to Damyana. "I knew it. There she is. I knew she'd come to me!" Brother Michael does one of his little karate dances.

"But what is she up to?" Greb wonders.

"Come to kill me, of course. She can't resist. Without me, the Crusade is nothing."

They can barely make out movement in the fields. Tall grass trembling in the starlight— several people at least, hard to tell for sure. But already there's a thin band of light in the east. Soon these defiant women will be at Michael's mercy. Watching the screen, Mikchr swivels his gun til it picks up the heat images in the field below.

"See now?" Michael crows. "Have faith! Didn't I tell you? The Lord has delivered them into our hands." Thunder from the south, and a little mosquito whine from the river, growing louder.

"That's what they're doing," Greb says, lifting his chin toward the river. "They're going to drop a force right into Semsenkir center." He sees faint silhouettes against the far shore, their gleaming wakes like arrows pointing out the target. A rattle against the stone walls, from the women at the ford. From behind the 25mm Boghos brackets the boats with erupting geysers.

"Forget them!" Michael yells. "The women below us— Cut them to pieces!" He yanks Lorenko's elbow to depress the gun at Zimara's team below. The first burst stitches Fayela to the ground. Zimara runs low amidst the fusillade to retrieve Fayela's splattergun.

"I see them Brother," Boghos exults. "I — ". Just then a flash outside the embrasure and the Crusader staggers back, his face a fuming crater. Tongues of flame lick into the chamber.

"What the hell?" Lorenko thrusts away the stumbling corpse, toppling it at Michael's feet; the Brother nimbly leaps aside.

"Your girl brought splatters," Greb observes. Just then another rocket hits the tower, scrabbling at the stone to get inside, and another after that. Lorenko drags the pack from fallen Taissa, lifts it to shove into the aperture. "What are you doing?"

"We need to block the firing slits, Brother."

"Don't hide, shoot!" Michael shouts, but the fourth rocket splashes at the walls and they drop gasping, faces buried in the crooks of their arms.

"Can't stay here, Michael." Greb pulls him into the stairwell, crowded already with the crew from the ground floor. Mikchr and the others pile in from above.

"Let me go!" Michael rasps, but smoke billows in like foam from a nozzle, and, choking, he can't break free.

From Filipa's boats the tower looks like the prow of a warship sundering a fiery sea. But soon it's out of sight. Ahead Filipa sees Semsenkir's quayside emerging from the fog. By that time Zimara's group have run out of splatter rockets, and driven by Brother Michael the Crusaders rush back to their firing positions. It's not hard to spot the women now. They are halfway to the river. The Crusaders rake the field with machinegun and cannon fire.

A little to the west Emiliye comms, "Zee! The boats got through! Zee!" Across the battlefield other prihvadji listen in. They hear no reply.

"Go get me her head," Michael demands. He holds out a sword.

Mikchr exchanges glances with the Sergeant Major. "Of course, Brother," Mikchr says. "Leave it to me." He takes the sword and heads down the steps.

The men in the tower begin to pay attention again to their comms. Mandalika's armor has cut through the south line like a welding torch. Michael calls Byedny at the bottle plant. "You'll be seeing some of the Zimaras soon. Don't worry. We've got them trapped. We'll hammer them on your anvil. But go ahead and get rid of your hostages." Byedny has a question. "What do you think?" Michael snarls. "All of them— of course. Yes, now."

Cut off there at the bottling plant with his handful of soldiers, Byedny is not too keen on this anvil idea. He's got all these whimpering infidels. Let them be the damn anvil. Better yet, a shield. Byedny decides to wait a bit. Instead, he sends a couple boys to set off the incendiaries they've placed all over town. Michael will see the fires; that should slake his thirst.

Stars fade against the brightening sky. In the fields by the river, what's left of Captain Toradzik's men feel unpleasantly exposed. The right of their line peels off, one or two at a time. They head dawnward, to the border. Men from the center soon join the silent exodus. As he pisses behind the old tower, Sergeant Major Greb notes furtive movements along the treeline. He shakes his prick and zips up. No sense in alarming his boss. The Brother has become a tad excitable of late— understandable, given his nasal mishap at the monastery. Anyway, Greb figures, they'll all regroup soon at Rudomil, or in heaven.

A kilometer to the west, Lieutenant Slatk and his captain crouch in a treeline, watching their troops melt away. "What do you want to do, sir?"

"I'm not staying here," Toradzik says. "We'd best get ahead of them. Leadership, right? I don't want to be last when these women come up over the riverbank."

Slatk touches his captain's sleeve. "A suggestion, sir. The Zimaras will be following these cowards. Perhaps we can take a different way."

The Captain slaps him on the shoulder. "I see your point." They rise and make their way southward across the flow of silent running men, who pay them no attention.

Emiliye calls Yelisavet. "Can you see Zimara's group?"

"No. We're going to get them."

"You don't have to. Filipa got to town OK, and Manda's on the way. The Dildos here, they are not so eager now. You can sit tight."

"We want to find her." Yelisavet nods to her team. "We've got the two splatterguns. Can't let them go to waste."

"I'm concerned you won't get close enough. They'll see you."

"Us and a hundred Dildos running like rabbits. Check it out."

Emiliye and her small group prihvadji peer over the top of the river bank. The Crusader line seems to be dissolving "They may be trying to get around our left."

"I don't think so. Watch. They're going to Kulkhiz."

"She's right," Lalekshany says. She shakes her head and laughs with surprise. "They're not coming back."

"Go then," Emiliye directs. "We're right behind you." Right behind the fleeing Crusaders, actually, firing as they run.

"Where's Mikchr?" Michael frets. "He should have been back by now."

"Mikchr's gone, Michael," Greb says.

"What do you mean, gone? Liar!"

"Brother— " Lorenko's finger follows the muzzle of the 25mm. Brother Michael peers out. Yes, definitely a lot of shadowy movement, like braided currents in a stream. Greb spits on the floor. It takes a minute for Michael to recognize the scurrying fugitives as his brave Crusaders. And to the west, a scatter of flashes from the river, becoming more coherent, more continuous, louder.

Michael nods with grim satisfaction. One final betrayal. Of course. He shoves Lorenko aside and cradles the big gun.

"I see you," he shouts. "You don't think I can see you? You have played the whore with the Assyrians!" he shouts. "I will judge you! I will give you blood!" Great gouts of dirt and meat erupt in the fields. Greb lays a hand on Michael's forearm.

"Brother, those are our men."

"Not men. Slaves! They serve Abomination. For these be the days of vengeance!" Michael shrieks, and pounds the fields with shellfire.

Greb slides a fist under Michael's arm and yanks him bodily from the 25mm. "You killed the bitch. What more do you want? Let's go!"

Michael looks at him with astonishment, then smiles. "I see now where your loyalties lie. Judas! The Son of Man shall be betrayed— "

Twenty meters away Yelisavet releases a rocket. The splatter bursts against the tower and a searing plume of flame boils into the chamber. Michael ducks and falls into a corner. Greb gestures to Boghos and the others. "Move it."

Michael scrambles to his feet. "Not without the bandit," he insists. "You will not deprive me of my victory!"

"Then you get her. We'll meet you at the border." Greb slings his pack over a shoulder.

"Don't you turn your back on me, dirty ape." Michael holds his pistol on the Sergeant Major. Greb turns and drops the pack. His big hands dangle loose at his side.

"That's right. A dirty ape. I made you!" Michael snarls. He is daring the Sergeant Major to respond.

Lorenko moves to one side, and Michael turns halfway to cover him. Greb punches his heavy blade into Michael's sternum and yanks upward, slamming his boss against the wall. "Don't stand there!" Greb grunts. Lorenko grabs Michael by the belt and together they hoist the archangel and jam him head first into the firing slit— just in time, as another splatter gushes against the wall. Michael screams once, one arm flailing, before his lungs are singed, and then can only whimper. Machinegun fire chops out pieces that fall like burning wax from a candle. Greb and the others slip out the back to join the Crusader flight eastward, into the rising sun.

● Shurik's Moment

The Crusaders at the bridge can hear Filipa's boats approach, but can't see them, because of the bend in the river. They are anyhow preoccupied with Lemane's ferocious attack from the north bank, so the waterborne Zimaras can land at the docks and disembark without danger. Rekady's group races to engage Crusaders stationed on the eastern outskirts, and finds no one; Toradzik drew them east, to

attack Emiliye's group trapped at the river, and now they are in full flight. Rekady's team runs back through town until they're in sight of the bridge. There they attack the defending Crusaders from behind.

Filipa takes a bigger group to the bottling plant. The Crusaders inside can see the Zimaras setting up in windows and on rooftops across the plaza. "Calm, men," Byedny tells them. "They're not going to attack us. Not while we've got their precious apostates."

"And Brother Michael is on his way. He'll clean up that crowd good, won't he, Lieutenant?" Byedny casts an annoyed look at the soldier by his side.

Filipa has brought along a bullhorn. This is her proposition to the defenders: "Hear that? We have taken the bridge. That's right," she lies. "And you've heard of Killer Mandalika. She is bringing up the tanks. Where is your savior now?" She lets them think about that a minute. "So here's the deal. You kill those people, all of you will die. Let them go free, we'll sell you to your pals in Kulkhiz." She calls out her comm number.

Someone breaks a window, and yells from the catwalk above: "We'll kill every one of you, whores! And when you die you'll go to hell!"

Byedny peers out the main door. No way to tell how many Zimaras there are out there. He could call Brother Michael, but then he'd have to tell him the hostages are still alive.

"Sir, we've got to fight these women. You can't be thinking of giving up." Byedny backs away from the door and looks up to see who is making all the noise. It's that kid Shurik, standing by a window on the second floor, waving his weapon with both hands. Shurik understands now why God killed his dad and gave him to Brother Michael. This is Shurik's moment. Really, the critical moment of the whole war. "We can't let these women win!" he shouts.

His comrades in arms look at him like he's crazy. Byedny says, "Shut up, won't you? I'm trying to think."

Shurik looks over the captives crowded below. It would be nothing to empty his weapons into them. He imagines the shrieks and terror. He imagines his aunt looking up at him. He looks for her now among the hundreds on the factory floor, but can't locate her. He looks out again across the plaza. He sees short swift movements along the rooftops— lots of them.

"Brother Michael can't help you now," Filipa calls out. "He is going to die. But you don't have to."

"I'm going to do it!" Shurik announces. "I swear it! You can't stop me! I'm going to finish it!" He waits till Byedny looks up again, then kicks more glass from the window and thrusts his weapon through. He's just a little kid, and Byedny's burst sends him twisting into the railing behind him.

"Wait! Wait!" Filipa hisses into her comm. But there's no further gunfire.

"Jesus, kid, you nearly got us all killed." Byedny waves at the others to lower their weapons, and raises the comm to his ear.

"Sorry about that," he tells Filipa. "You know these young guys. We love their enthusiasm, don't we? Sometimes it gets a little out of hand. No harm done, right?" All very chummy, he asks Filipa how she wants to do this. His soldiers relax a bit. So do the Zimaras among the captives; they'll hold off for now their desperate breakout plan.

Byedny plants a foot in the doorway. "We're coming out. Do you hear? We're coming out."

He throws out a gun and raises his hands. The Lieutenant figures if the Zimaras don't shoot him in the first five minutes, he might have a chance to survive this war. He tries to think who in his family he can ask to pay for his release, but they all hate his guts.

Sandriya edges under the grillwork where her nephew lies sprawled and silent. "Shurik," she whispers. She can't see his face. Sandriya has to step back quick; he's leaking.

• Rekady Is Not Ready

Yelisavet's team finds Zimara and the others scattered amid emptied weapons below the tower. The bodies have been badly mangled, but they identify Zimara by the ragged zeta cut into her face. They call in the location, then rejoin Emiliye.

Emiliye's group and half of Mandalika's pursue the Dildos all the way to the Kulkhiz border. Along the way they come across several Crusader corpses cooling in the woods. Larissa Dvelko's killers have been busy, pretending to be Crusaders, picking off stragglers by ones and twos, doing uncivilized things to the bodies. When they cut off and capture Toradzik's main force just hours from Rudomil, Emiliye can barely hold her own people back from doing the same. "Zimara wouldn't want this," she tells them. Toradzik himself eludes them.

Back in Semsenkir Mandalika's fighters mop up while Filipa's crew carry the wounded to the boats, including several barges they find still tied up at the docks. Blocks away Rekady's crew help a hundred of the freed townspeople battle fires among the shops and warehouses. They see their food stocks and livelihoods threatened, but what they fear most at this point is that the conflagration will set off the Crusader ammo dump in a nearby salvage yard. They have snaked waterlines from the river and Mandalika's tanks bulldoze firebreaks, but it's hours of desperate and dangerous work under a rain of cinders from nearby buildings. At last they can turn their efforts to saving the remaining homes and businesses.

Arasely spends hours processing the first batch of captured Crusaders. Then she goes looking for Rekady and finds him crumpled on a curb by the river, forearms on his knees, staring into the smoking ruins. She squats down beside him. Rekady tips his head to acknowledge her. Together they watch inscrutable debris swirl past clogged gutters, the black-streaked flotsam of so many lives.

"You know they found Zee and Fayela and the others."

"I heard."

"When we're done here, I want you to come see me. We can talk."

Rekady rubs eyes and cheeks with smoke-smeared hands. "Zimara and me, we'd talk about everything. Good things, terrible things. Beautiful things."

"I'll miss that, too," she says. After a bit she stands, taps him on the shoulder, and heads down the street.

Rekady watches her go. He'll do his job. Then . . . he can't imagine. He stands, too. "I'm not ready for this," he calls.

Arasely turns around. "What?"

"I'm not ready!" His hands are at his sides, curled into fists, trembling. "I am not ready!"

Arasely nods thoughtully. "I need you. Come see me." She turns again and walks into the twists of smoke still drifting through the streets.

Rekady knows he should go see her. It would help them both. But he doesn't. "Zee always does what's right and sensible," he tells himself. "That's not me." He doesn't know how to share this. He sees Arasely once again briefly, at the funeral.

Emiliye's hunters return late that night bearing their dead. Mandalika has commandeered a barge for the bodies of the slain, fighters and townspeople, laid out on tarps and left uncovered for friends and family to view, Zimara's corpse among them. Many linger long by her body. Zimara's confidence in herself infected her fighters. Now it's hard to reconcile this small, tattered bundle with the woman they knew. Even the scar has swollen and twisted to obscure her handiwork.

Early next morning hundreds assemble along the narrow waterfront. They stand silently, shifting a bit in the cold, exhaling frosty plumes into delicate newborn sunlight. The prihvadji read the names of the dead and cover the bodies. It feels like a mass burial. Beyond that they have no words. Maybe later. The group leaders leave the boat and it sets off downstream.

They hold Zimara's funeral the following week in Manomekhlis, where Zimara once spoke about Berenika, the first woman to die for the Brigade. Berenika's parents host this gathering as they did for their own daughter. They bury Taissa here, too, who fought then alongside Berenika.

Zimara's cousin Filipa takes Gret and Aloyzi home with her, to raise with Yesenya.

● Unravel

Far away in the Kulkhiz capital, the Archbishop tries to put the best face on it. He conducts a solemn mass for the fallen martyrs, and vows to fight on. He does not fail to note that, this time, only exiles attend the service. Of the crowd of locals who used to attend his fiery sermons, only a few older people remain; those too poor to have screens at home, Nagahry suspects. In the following weeks, he has trouble meeting payroll. His hosts and paymasters seem to be having second thoughts. It takes days, but he finally gets a sit-down with Judge Hokh. The generals' messenger treats Nagahry to bloatfish at one of the seaside resorts.

"Don't worry," he tells the Archbishop, "it's some kind of accounting thing. Updating the software, they tell me. You'll get the usual by the end of the week." But he doesn't. The staff at his media production company stop coming to work. Eddie depended too much on the pilgrim trade at Rudomil to scarf up his inspirational leafs and wallscrolls, and now sales have fallen off the cliff.

Similar erosions occur in Hidris. With Brother Michael gone to heaven, Greb closes the Married to Jesus office. Mladenka has no interest in returning to her family, and comes to the Archbishop looking for a job. She is not Nagahry's favorite, but he's fresh out of a cuddle buddy, and Mladenka, lucky girl, gets the position, several in fact, until Eddie can find better. With it comes the Commander title, too, and an extra epaulette; she lacks only the death squad. Mladenka is noisy and controlling and thinks to rise above her station.

Eddie explodes when he hears Hokh has been moving cash direct to Captain Toradzik— someone Nagahry knows only as a very junior officer, a lackey and lickspittle. Toradzik! So now not getting killed is taken as the sign of strategic genius.

Mladenka urges the Archbishop to confront the upstart. "Do it now. Show them who's boss!"

Nagahry dithers. One day Mladenka bursts into his office as he scrolls through porn on his machine, chewing the corner of a fingernail. Lots of pink, but his mind wanders. Mladenka slaps a screenpad on the desk. The image shows Abbot Torkim posing before Rudomil church with Toradzik and three officers whose names Nagahry cannot recall. The caption says they are the Crusade's new leadership team. "They don't even mention you, us!" Mladenka points out, quite unnecessarily.

Nagahry acts like he doesn't hear, so Mladenka sweeps his computer off the desk. "Be a man!"

The Archbishop shrugs and rises. He goes to the closet, opens the safe, takes out a gun and his last wad of riyal. "Where does this traitor stay?" That's more like it! She tells him where to find Toradzik.

Eddie thinks about who he'll call, old comrades, commanders he can trust. They'll meet in secret at Tyvrdava. Time for a rebirth of the Crusader spirit. Root out the traitors! They'll make schemes, appointments, manifestos. Transformed, he smiles at Mladenka, a sort of pitying smile, looking down from a great height. Behold reborn the Nagahry of old: commanding, ruthless, intolerant of rivals.

Nagahry is surprised to find Mr. Totemish waiting outside the gates, leaning against a gleaming Temyat.

"Where's my driver? I called for my driver."

"He'll come back. I wanted a few minutes with you."

"Later. I've got an appointment to keep."

"Then let me give you a ride. We can talk on the way." The Archbishop looks around fretfully, then slides in beside the courier from Clear Sparkling. Totemish notes the gun in his hand. He leans over to open the pocket. "You could put that in there until we pass the checkpoints. Unless you intend using it

in next few minutes?" The Archbishop stares at him stupidly, finally complies. He watches Djemdjad passing by, and gnaws the tips of his fingers. As they wend their way into the hills above the city, Totemish explains his mission.

"My masters in Shanghai wanted me to tell you how disappointed they are in the way you handled the Khazar treasure story."

"It will blow over." Nagahry is scarcely listening. He knows he has to act, but he doesn't know how.

Totemish continues. "The higher-ups are not so sure. Now we've got other companies circling like sharks. You've left blood in the water. The politicians are afraid to deal with Clear Sparkling."

"Exactly. That's why you've got to stick with me."

"Actually not. You are damaged goods, forgive me for saying so. And the only one remaining who can connect us to the stolen artifacts. My company needs a new partner."

This gets the Archbishop's attention. "What are you talking about? There's no one else who can deliver Rudeny to you."

"I guess they talked about it quite a bit, back in Shanghai. They figure a new archbishop would be just the thing. What do you think of this guy Torkim?"

"You are out of your mind."

"Possibly they are out of *their* minds. I just deliver the message. If it were up to me, I'd let the Crusaders take care of it. This new captain, what's his name?"

"I got news for your bosses. He won't last out the week. I'll squash him like a bug."

"Seems unlikely, Holy Joy."

"They'd be fools to trust Toradzik."

"That's more or less their thinking, too. 'We don't know this Toradzik," they told me. 'But we know you, Mr. Totemish. We rely on you."

"You tell them from me, I won't go without a fight."

"Sadly, not true," says the courier. Steering with one hand, he takes a gun from his jacket with the other. Nagahry looks at him with alarm, eyes darting between the gun and the messenger's face. "Can't really say it's been a pleasure doing business with you," Totemish remarks. Nagahry starts to say something, catches a couple in the mouth. Totemish pulls to the side of the road, waits for traffic to clear, then gets his arms under Nagahry and hauls him into the grass beside the road. When he gets back in the car Totemish powers down the passenger side window to conceal unsightly holes and spatter. He inserts an earbud, tunes into a satellite station, and pulls back into traffic.

Totemish hums as he drives away. One thing he likes about his job is the people he meets. Even the jerks can be interesting, their fantastic desires and schemes. Ugly sometimes, and pathetic, but intriguing in their endless variety. He holds no illusions that anyone will recall his own performance when he's gone, but Mr. Totemish is determined to play heartily his small part in life's strange and moving pageant.

Judge Hokh drives up a minute later in a van, and Greb and Berezan get out. Yes, our doughty Crusaders have found new employment in Kulkhiz. As he watches the duo briskly bundle the ex-archbishop in a painter's drop cloth, the Judge feels distinctly creaky. Money and murder attract him less these days. He'd like to take up watercolors. Soon he should name a successor. Greb is not the debonair man about town the Judge used to be, but times change. Now the generals need a different kind of handyman.

● A Gift

Melanie meets Totemish a week later at a gallery in Izmir. They sit before a broken bronze from Ephesus, a lively little boy riding an ox.

"You come highly recommended," she says.

"Kind of you to say so." Totemish too did his homework. He knows that his employer at Clear Sparkling serves on the board of one of Melanie's museums. Very civic-minded, these billionaires.

"That's a lovely ring," she observes.

"Do you like it?" He takes it off and gives it to her.

Melanie examines it closely. "Exquisite." She holds it out to him.

Totemish waves his hand. "A gift. There are more like it."

"Indeed? My understanding was that the Hoard of the Khazars is on its way to Saray." Melanie slips the ring on her finger, and holds it up to admire it.

"Already there, in the basement of the national bank, under heavy guard and swarmed by AATC inspectors. But not every piece made it to the ship. I'm told several very select artifacts remain in Hidris. Seems one of the Crusader commanders fancied himself a connoisseur. He is no longer with us, so . . . ."

"I hope they can be recovered."

"Vey likely. With so many agencies and governments watching, though, the costs will be substantial." Sergeant Major Greb has already offered his services for this endeavor. He is not modest about their value.

Melanie sighs. "I feel like I've paid for half these pieces already."

Totemish sits with folded hands. "I prefer real estate. Homely but reliable. I have found that the politicians who govern such things are always eager to help. And if you wait, eventually you will get good prices." He smiles. "The trick is to live long enough."

Melanie stands up and extends her long fingers for Totemish to clasp. "I'll hear from you?"

He stands up, inclines his head. "Certainly. A pleasure."

● New Career

Who knew? Meek and bullied Lorenko turns out to be quite the scribbler, vivid and dramatic. Too lavish with cliches, but all the right ones; he knows his audience. Lorenko quits the Crusade after Semsenkir to start a blog about his experience in the war. In time he expands into a line of leafs, with titles like *Front Lines of Faith, Cross and Sword,* and *Christ My Captain.* Mr. Polking of the Coalition to Defend the Faith invites him to the States, where Lorenko makes it big on the Sunday school lecture circuit. The Faithful find his accent and broken English charming. The high point comes when he shares a stage in Des Moines with a brilliant young televangelist and the cadaverous shouting general, "God Is On Our Side" Godfrey. Scrawny Lorenko fills out from church brunch chicken and pie.

● Endless Love

After Zimara's funeral Damyana retires to Besim Brod, where she asks Larissa Dvelko for a loan to buy a house. Since Gloria's inglorious demise, the Nderadj has no further use for the ex-Brigade member, but who knows? Someday Larissa might once again need the services of a remorseless killer from outside the family. So she coughs up a few thousand riyal— Larissa thinks of it as a sort of retainer.

Damyana puts a down payment on a little place with a well and room for a garden. Inside she fills a cabinet with the souvenirs she stole from the Zimaras and their children: toys and trinkets, cheap jewelry, a prayer shawl, photos of nameless smiling families. Sometimes she turns on the satellite music and takes her treasures out to look at them. She realized too late that all she has from Gloria is one bracelet from a set, both inscribed, Friends Forever. She gave Gloria the twin, and Gloria put it on right away, and later said she lost it. Didn't feel right to keep that snippet of Zimara's hair, so Damyana threw it from the bus as she left Kavkaz for the last time. She locks the cabinet and keeps the key on a string around her neck.

Damyana invites her mom to move in with her. Fadees knows her daughter too well, though, and prefers a prickly stalemate with her brother to dependence on Damyana's inconstant mercies. In Besim Brod the rich smugglers' wives have sewn up the local church scene, so Damyana once again finds herself outside, as she has been all her life, except for the brief months of love and purpose with the bandit Zimara.

§ View of the Sea

Late May Avbury takes a hiking tour of the western Pyrenees with her daughter and granddaughter. Gret Nareet tags along one day. By noon they find themselves in an alpine meadow with a shimmering view of the ocean. They stop for lunch and dig into the chicken and pasta and figs they bought in the village below. The girl spots a twirl of butterflies and is off among the flowers, waving a little net like a semaphore. Her mom follows at a leisurely pace.

Avbury asks, "After all that, did you find out what you wanted to know?"

"I learned some things. About Zimara; about me, too."

"And what was it you wanted to know?"

"The questions. Yes. I did figure that out. What was driving her? What did she see before anyone else? And why did she leave me? How could she do that, if she loved me at all?" Gret shakes her head. "I mean, I know she did. Sometimes, though, it felt like maybe I was just one of many she had to rescue."

"You can't know how fierce she was to get you back, you and your brother. I think those were the first words I heard her say. She fought hard to get you."

"Just couldn't hold on."

"Just made a mistake," Avbury amends. "Miscalculated." She tosses back a slug of water.

Gret shrugs, nods. "I think so. She thought she could get away with taking the risk one last time. Or maybe . . . . They tell me she was very anxious those last several weeks, and that's my memory, too. It shocked them because she had been so sure before. Mandalika told me she thinks her fear made her all the more determined to push through." Across the field the girl Elissa has found something wonderful and runs to show her mother. Gret says, "She always had to do the right thing, regardless of the cost."

"I think she always felt the cost, very keenly."

"Maybe so, but she went ahead anyway. I'm still pissed off about that. That last day . . . ." She hesitates, thinking of it. "That last terrible day there had to have been a point when she realized she wasn't going to see us again. That we would not see her again."

"She and the others on her team. They all knew."

"Such sorrow!" Gret rocks back and forth a moment, arms pressed tight against her belly. She takes a deep breath, nostrils flaring. "Must be why I forgive her."

"You are lucky. I'm an old woman. I'm still trying to learn to forgive people. Forgive myself."

"I can't tell you how glad I am that I got a chance to talk again with these women. People I have come to love and admire. Most of them I hadn't seen since I was a kid. I hadn't realized how sharply aware they were of what we were going through, me and Aloyzi. They went out of their way to make it easier for us. They'd seen so much loss with their own families. Makes me feel like you all are sisters to me," Gret says. "Does that make sense? So how can I be jealous of my own sisters?

Gret pauses, remembering. "Know what they said about Zimara?"

"I met your mom once outside Saray, in a truck full of supplies I'd looted from New Start. Zee had just come from a big meeting with the Brigade. She told me about it, all the things she had to consider, the hard choices they had to make, and I thought, Here I am, near twice her age, and I am learning so much from this woman."

"Yes. A lot of women told me that. They saw her clearly, they know where she fucked up, but she is still such a presence for them.

"This is what they told me, too: they wish Zimara was around so they could tell her about their lives. Their kids, their lovers, their discoveries, the good things they've found. That's what I want, more than anything. You are nodding."

Avbury says, "You are making me remember. You know after she left New Start Zee and I would talk by comm sometimes. And it surprised me, one day she asked about Adriana, said she wanted to meet her. Said she wanted me to meet you and Aloyzi. So yes, I regret she never got to meet my

daughter, who is such a big part of my life, and now Elissa. It was an incomplete relationship, Zee and I. I guess it had to be." She taps Gret on the knee. "But I've come to know you. And now you've met my family. Makes me happy."

They watch the girl a little way downslope, prancing and yelping as she catches bugs and lets them go. Her mom sits under a tree eating a sandwich, lunch basket by her side. She calls out praise and encouragement to the girl.

Avbury crumples the greasy chicken wrap and twists it into a plastic bag. "Have you started writing?"

"No, and I don't think I will. What I learned is not what I promised my editor." She shrugs. "And I don't need to. I think I understand what happened, or at least I have a better story. That's what I wanted. The other part is important, how you all built the Collective, but I'll let someone else write that." Gret brushes stray pasta off her skirt. "I think now Zimara didn't ever stop being my mom. She just had a really big definition of motherhood."

Elissa lets out a whoop and comes bounding over rocks and grass, hands cupped. "Look, Gram!" It's a beetle, armor incised with arabesques in blue and gold. It walks ticklish up the girl's wrist and takes off on a curving path. The women gather their packs and follow it up the mountain.